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# **Children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships in a rural Chinese boarding school**

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Ph.D. Social Policy

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# Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Yan Zhu

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yan Zhu', written in a cursive style.

22/11/2019

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## Abstract

Research is limited on friendships in childhood, particularly that of Chinese rural children. To fill this gap, this research explores Chinese children's understandings and practices of peer friendships in the context of a rural primary boarding school. Data for this research were collected through intensive 5-month ethnographic fieldwork with Primary Year 5 children in a rural primary boarding school (given the pseudonym "Central Primary School") in Hubei Province, China in 2016. Given the importance of ethics in childhood studies and the sensitivity of talking about friendship experiences, ethical guidelines have been carefully followed and are reflected throughout the research process.

Through analysing children's talk about and interactions with different peers who were named as "friends", this research argues that those who are friends, and what friendships mean and look like, are contextualized. Research findings can be summarized in three points. Firstly, children's friendships can be categorized into different types with different purposes and expectations. In Chinese children's friendship groups, friendships can be formed on a basis of intimacy between individuals ("intimate friendship"), of friends' "usefulness" in helping one to improve school experiences ("instrumental friendship"), or of individuals' shared identity as "in-group members" (*zijiren*) of the same "collective" (*jiti*). Secondly, friendships are dynamic, with the levels of intimacy between friends potentially being upgraded or downgraded in friendship practices; therefore, conversion can happen amongst these forms of friendships. Thirdly, gender, power structures amongst children, hierarchical relationships between children and significant adults (teachers and parents), and China's Confucian and collectivist values significantly shape these Chinese children's constructions and practices of peer friendships. This research points out that these elements are not isolated but related when shaping children's friendships.

This research has four main contributions. Firstly, it contributes to sociological conceptualizations of friendships through providing rich findings on Chinese children's various definitions, patterns, and practices of peer friendships in a boarding school context. Secondly, it uses a Chinese case to enhance our understandings of children's capacities as social actors in the construction of their social relationships in childhood. Thirdly, through discussing difficulties that Chinese children experienced in relationships with others at school, this research contributes a critical reflection on current practices in China's schools of relationship education, school organization, and student evaluation mechanisms. Fourthly, this research brings knowledge and methodological contributions to the English language literature on Chinese school studies. It offers details about what life in a Chinese rural boarding school is like, how such schools function, and the embedded socio-cultural norms in the Chinese school setting. It provides a reflexive account of the applications and challenges of ethnographic methods and ethics in Chinese school studies (e.g., approaches to gaining access to a Chinese school setting, and to dealing with ethical dilemmas caused by hierarchy in Chinese relationships).

# Lay Summary

This research aims to provide vivid stories of “what rural Chinese children’s friendships in a boarding school setting look like” and in-depth discussions of “why their friendships are constructed in particular ways”. Data for this research were collected through intensive 5-month fieldwork in a rural primary boarding school (given the pseudonym “Central Primary School”) in Hubei Province, China in 2016. In the field, I lived in Central Primary School and participated in Primary Year 5 children’s daily school routines. Through this participatory approach, I closely observed how these children negotiated the school environment to talk about and “do” friendships with peers.

Through analysing children’s talk about and interactions with peers who were named as “friends”, this research reaches three main conclusions. Firstly, when a child named a peer as a “friend”, this “friend” can be an “intimate friend” with whom they have a strong emotional attachment, or an “instrumental/useful friend” who can benefit their school experiences, or a “collective friend” who is an “in-group member” (*zijiren*) of their “collective” (*jiti*). Secondly, conversion can happen among these different forms of friendships. For example, an instrumental friend can be upgraded to an “intimate friend”; while, an “intimate friend” can be downgraded to be an instrumental friend. Thirdly, gender, power structures amongst children, hierarchical relationships between children and significant adults (teachers and parents), and China’s Confucian and collectivist values were four closely related influential elements that significantly shaped these Chinese children’s understandings and experiences of peer friendships.

This research has four main contributions. Firstly, its rich findings of Chinese children’s various definitions, patterns, and practices of peer friendships in a rural boarding school setting contribute to sociological conceptualizations of friendships. Secondly, it enhances our understandings of children’s capacities



as social actors in the construction of their own social relationships through discussing these rural Chinese children's creative and sophisticated practices of friendships at school. It gives an example of the complexities of childhood through describing what children's school lives in a rural Chinese boarding school look like. Thirdly, it discusses difficulties that children experienced in their school friendships, which contributes a critical reflection on China's current practices of school management (e.g., involving some children as student leaders) and children's relationship education. Fourthly, this research enriches the English language literature on Chinese school studies, specifically school ethnographies, through offering a detailed account of its ethnographic fieldwork process and of the methodological and ethical challenges in a Chinese school-based study.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research background

The concept of friendship, an important form of interpersonal relationship across the life-course, has been explored by many scholars from different disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology (e.g., Allan, 1979; Badhwar, 1993; Bell and Coleman, 1999; Hartup and Rubin, 2013). Adams and Allan (1998) emphasize that, to understand friendships, one needs to place them in context. Childhood, at the beginning of the life-course, is seen as an essential context in which to situate friendship research (Nayak, 2013). I therefore chose children's friendships with peers in the context of rural China as my Ph.D. research interest due to my reflections, described below, on my experience of working with children in China.

In China today, being able to develop positive interpersonal relationships with others is viewed as a significant element of a child's "*suzhi*"<sup>1</sup> (quality) in China's current "*suzhi jiaoyu*" (quality education) system, which focuses on children's all-round development (see Chapter 2). Thus, helping children to develop positive interpersonal relationships with others is considered a central goal of schooling, particularly in primary and middle school (e.g. Shi and Li, 2013; Lin and Yao, 2014). For example, in 2010, the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) (*guojia zhongchangqi jiaoyugaige he fazhan guihuagangyao*) places particular emphasis on improving children's social and emotional skills to enable them to establish positive relationships with others, such as parents, teachers, and peers. Consequently, schools, families and other educational organizations have engaged in practices that help their children to achieve this goal. For example, both People Impact (Wuhan), a commercial children's intelligence

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure smooth writing, when using some Chinese terms in the text I only include *hanyu pinyin*, the official romanization system for standard Chinese in mainland China. See the original Chinese characters in Appendix I: Glossary.

training organization that I worked for in 2014, and UNICEF (China), an international organization that I worked for in 2017, view improving children's capabilities for positive relationships with teachers, parents and peers as one of their main goals.

Unfortunately, such practices are not equally developed across all of China. Compared with urban children, rural children's experiences of interpersonal relationships face more challenges, but fewer resources are provided with which to support them (see Chapter 2). In recent years, the Chinese government has started to work on this issue. For example, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and UNICEF jointly released the Social and Emotional Learning Project in China, conducted since 2011 (e.g., Shi and Li, 2013; UNICEF, 2019). It focuses particularly on helping rural Chinese children to develop the social and emotional intelligence needed to manage their everyday relationships with others. Nonetheless, according to released documents about this programme, it seems that in-depth understanding of what these rural Chinese children's everyday relationships with significant others, especially peer friendships at school, look like – a crucial preparatory task in contextualizing the project design – is virtually absent (see Chapter 2). Thus, the question of whether this programme has been well adapted to China's particular sociocultural context, rather than echoing the practices of Western countries' Social and Emotional Learning programmes, might need to be answered.

In fact, this missing information may not only weaken the results of related policies and practices but also restrict or even misdirect mainstream understandings of rural Chinese childhoods. For instance, I once worked with rural Chinese pupils in two primary boarding schools in Hubei Province as a volunteer teacher in 2010 and as a researcher in 2015. In these areas, I participated in and observed rural Chinese pupils' talk about and interactions with named friends, other peers such as classmates and other schoolmates, and significant adults, including teachers and parents/grandparents/other

relatives as guardians. While doing so, I was intrigued by the sophisticated and creative approaches which these pupils employed to manage their relationships with these significant others. Among these relationships, these boarding pupils' vivid narrations about and interactions with friends and other peers at school, evoked, as Thorne (1993) observed, some memories of my own friendships during the primary school years. However, as a Chinese woman who grew up in urban area of China and attended day schools, some parts of these narrations and interactions were unfamiliar to me. Therefore, I wanted to know more about what children's friendships in boarding school looked like.

However, when I sought an answer in the literature, I noticed that Chinese children's friendships with peers in the school setting (notably in boarding schools) was a less developed topic. When I was disappointed by the abstract, simplistic and limited descriptions of Chinese children's peer friendships at school in the literature produced by adults, I remembered the vividly detailed, complex and diverse stories that children told me about their friendships with peers. I then realized that the absence of children's "voice" in these studies of children's experiences prevents us – adult researchers and readers – from developing a deep, comprehensive and immersive understanding of the diversity and complexity of children's everyday experiences in particular contexts (see Chapter 3).

Further, the impressions of children's relationships with others, not only peers but also parents and teachers, held by the majority of Chinese studies and in my own memories, were contradictory. In the mainstream academic literature and social media in China, rural children's abilities to properly manage relationships with peers, parents, and teachers are commonly described as "problematic" and "less-developed". This is especially highlighted in



discussions of children with migrant parents<sup>2</sup> and residential students in boarding schools (see Chapter 2). These “problematic” relationships are most commonly attributed to children being deprived of social and emotional family support (e.g., Growing Home, 2015). Moreover, “problematic” relationships with others and experiences of being away from family support further construct an “unhappy” and “less-developed” stereotype of rural Chinese children in the boarding school setting. Nonetheless, my experiences made me doubt these negative stereotypes, particularly that of the children’s interpersonal relationships with peers. For example, although these children’s narrations about and interactions with peers suggested certain difficulties, such as bullying and conflicts, their everyday school lives with peers contained more positive and “happy” experiences, such as help, cooperation and play. In addition, by contrast with the negative stereotype of these children’s “less-developed” capabilities in relationship management, I observed their wisdom, creativity and autonomy in their processes of dealing with relationships in both the two boarding schools.

Through reflections on these contradictory findings, I noticed that the widespread stereotype of “less-developed” rural children and their “problematic” relationships with others not only stems from the dominant position of psychological studies, which always express concerns about the “outcome” and “quality” of their friendships (see Chapter 2), but also reflects oversimplified understandings of “what friendship is” and “who friends are”. For example, in 2015, as a researcher, I visited a rural boarding school to experience children’s everyday lives. In the field, there was also a group of volunteer teachers. One night, in a daily reflection meeting, one volunteer teacher reported that a conflict had arisen in her art class among a group of girls who named each other as friends. These girls fought over a limited

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<sup>2</sup> Such children are officially defined as those who remain ‘in rural areas while both of their parents move to urban areas as migrant workers or one parent moves to cities as a migrant worker and the remaining parent has no ability to provide care to the child’ (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2016:1).

number of coloured pens. Their behaviour was described as “not the way friends are supposed to behave” by many of the volunteer teachers at the meeting; they believed that friends should be “generous to each other and happy to share”. The conversation was then extended to critique these rural children’s “problematic” behaviours when dealing with friendships with peers. The teachers particularly noted that these children’s words did not appear to match their deeds (“*shuoyitao zuoyitao*”) when dealing with friendships with peers. For example, some volunteer teachers suggested that some of the children’s friendships might be “fake”. As they explained, they had observed that it was not unusual for some of the children to complain that they did not like certain “friends” who they claimed took advantage of them or even bullied them in the name of “friendship”. Nevertheless, these teachers also noticed that these children still tended to hang around frequently with these “friends”. The teachers, however, did not place their “findings” in particular contexts to explore why these things happened. The conversations simply ended with the teachers agreeing on mainstream concerns about these rural children’s “problematic” relationships with others, as argued in both academic literature and social media.

From this remembered episode, I questioned whether we, as adults, might apply certain “taken-for-granted” evaluation criteria when judging whether or not a relationship performs in the ways that we expect a “friendship” to do. When we notice that certain performances of “friendship” do not perfectly match our “taken-for-granted” evaluation criteria, we might jump to the conclusion that the friendships are “fake” or “problematic”. I was concerned that these “taken-for-granted” evaluation criteria not only oversimplify the meanings of “friendship” (see Chapter 2) but also encourage negative stereotypes of these rural Chinese children’s relationships with others.

In sum, through reflecting on these contradictory findings between my experiences and mainstream Chinese literature, with support from sociological theories found in childhood studies and friendship studies (see Chapter 2), I

recognized the importance of letting children tell “stories” about their lives (see Chapter 3), and appreciated that the terms “friendship” and “friend” can have complex and diverse meanings in various contexts (see Chapter 2). Thus, I believed that a child-centred study about “what rural Chinese pupils’ contextualized friendships in the boarding school setting look like” and “why their friendships are constructed in these ways” was part of the preparatory work needed to support a comprehensive understanding of Chinese rural children’s relationships with others. This is how I finally chose the focus of this Ph.D. thesis.

## **1.2 Research questions and method**

The aim of the research is to explore the complexity and diversity of Chinese children’s understandings and practices of peer friendships in the context of a rural primary boarding school.

**Question 1:** What are the different types of friendships between children and their peers in a school setting? How do children understand and practise different types of friendships with peers at school?

**Question 2:** How does gender influence children’s friendships with peers in a school setting?

**Question 3:** How do the power relations between children and significant adults (teachers and parents) and the power structures amongst children influence children’s experiences of friendships with peers?

**Question 4:** How do Chinese sociocultural values shape children’s understandings of friendships with peers and their daily acts of doing friendships in a school setting?

From the academic training I received during my M.Sc. in Childhood Studies at the University of Edinburgh, I discovered the power of ethnographic studies with children to provide a deep, thick, vivid and dynamic description of children's lives (see Chapters 2 and 3). Thus, to answer these research questions, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork lasting five months (from February to July 2016) at a primary rural boarding school in the western area of Hubei Province, mainly working with 49 Primary Year 5 children (see Chapter 3). During this period, I lived in Central Primary School's on-campus teachers' accommodation and participated in the children's daily school routines. This allowed me to immerse myself deeply and engage in their everyday school lives in order to investigate how the children negotiated the school environment to talk and "do" friendships with friends and other surrounding peers, such as classmates.

I was also inspired by the rights-based (as in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (General Assembly of United Nations, 1989)) concept of appreciating child participation and the use of rigorous ethics to protect children in research (e.g., Morrow, 2005; Hill, 2005; Gallagher, 2009a; Wyness, 2012). Thus, I was eager to introduce these ideas about children's rights and ethical considerations in working with children in China. In the fieldwork, I placed children at the centre of this study to let them tell us vividly what their friendships look like, and I sought to conduct my research ethically to protect and respect their wellbeing throughout and after the research.

### **1.3 Definitions of key concepts and terms**

According to the definition of a "child" in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a "child" is 'every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (General Assembly of United Nations, 1989: Article 1). In this thesis, the expression "rural Chinese children" refers to the group of children who live in rural regions and are characterized as rural residents within China's household

registration system (*hukou*). “Rural primary boarding school” in this thesis refers to the type of primary school in rural areas of China where the majority of pupils are residential, the result of a national policy called School Merging (*cedian bingxiao*) (see Chapter 2).

There are several definitions of children’s “friendship”. For example, one definition is: ‘a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between two children [...] often characterized by shared interests, cooperation, and equality’ (Morrison and Burgman, 2009:145). However, in this introductory chapter, I am not going to provide a definition of “friendship”, since the whole thesis considers the way definitions of “friendship” are contextualized, dynamic and diverse. Nevertheless, there is a need to specify that, in this thesis, an interpersonal relationship between children is referred to as “friendship” (*youyi*) when at least one party names it as such. There is also a need to distinguish between the terms “friends” and “peers” as used in this thesis. In general, the use of the term “peers” (*tongban/pengbei qunti*) is not intended to compress the social and interpersonal relationships between children into a ‘flattening notion’ (Thorne, 1993:9), but rather to refer to a larger group of children than “friends” (*pengyou*). This larger group (e.g. classmates) contains children who spend time together ‘on an everyday basis’ (Corsaro, 2003:37) and collectively produce and share a peer culture.

In this thesis, the expression “understandings and experiences of friendships” emphasizes the different perspectives adopted in exploring these rural Chinese children’s friendships with peers at a primary boarding school. The expression “understandings of friendships” mainly refers to an exploration of what “friendship” is and who friends are. This exploration largely relies on talk-based data collected when children verbalized their understandings. The expression “experiences of friendships” particularly emphasizes the “ongoing process” of “doing” friendships with peers via contextualized and diverse actions of constructing, maintaining/challenging and reconstructing friendships

on an everyday basis in a school setting. The data employed to depict the “experiences” are derived from both the children’s words and my observations.

## **1.4 Thesis structure**

This thesis has eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the ways existing studies of children’s friendships have inspired this Ph.D. research and which gaps the study seeks to fill. Reviewing studies of children’s friendships, it particularly highlights how sociological approaches to understanding and researching friendships and childhood can help to deliver a complex, dynamic and contextualized picture of rural Chinese children’s understandings and experiences of friendships with peers in a primary boarding school setting.

Chapter 3 discusses how this research was designed, adjusted and conducted to answer my research questions based on five months’ intensive ethnographic fieldwork in a primary boarding school in a rural area in Hubei Province in China. It details the reasons for adopting an ethnographic methodology and clarifies my choice of research setting, sample and data collection methods. This chapter also contains reflexive accounts of my experiences while managing my multiple roles in interactions with different parties in the research setting and my approaches to applying and embodying ethical considerations in practice in the context of China.

This thesis contains four findings chapters. Chapter 4 discusses the children’s “intimate friendships” with their most special friends, such as their best friends. It unpacks how the children understood the most critical elements of intimate friendships and the various strategies these children used to “display” such friendships. Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between the children’s same-gender friendships and their heterosexual romances in a gender-separated school setting. Chapter 6 explores the “instrumental friendships” amongst children. It considers how this type of friendship differed from intimate

friendship in that it was constructed on the basis of a friend's usefulness and the mutual exchange of benefits for personal needs. Chapter 7 adopts a broader sociocultural perspective to understand the influence of Confucian-collectivist values on the children's friendships. It discusses not only how the idea of "collective" (*jiti*) and obligations to the "collective interest" (*jiti liyi*) shaped children's understandings and experiences of friendships, but also the role played by significant adults (teachers and parents) in children's friendships, particularly in the choice of friends.

Chapter 8 summarizes this study's findings to answer the four research questions. It compares different types of friendships constructed and practised by these rural Chinese pupils in the boarding school setting. It reviews how elements of the surrounding context (gender, power and sociocultural values) functioned in these Chinese children's friendships. It also underlines this research's theoretical, methodological and ethical contributions to the fields of friendship studies and childhood studies both in general and in the China's boarding school context.

# **Chapter 2 Literature review**

## **2.1 Introduction**

Childhood friendship is viewed as a valuable topic in different disciplines, especially in psychology (particularly from the perspective of developmental psychology), sociology and anthropology. When studying friendship, both in general and in the context of childhood, disciplines have offered differing definitions of “friendship”, each with a particular focus and research interest. However, as argued by Bagwell and Schmidt (2011), friendship studies from these different disciplines rarely intersect; instead, they often proceed in parallel. Thus, some scholars (e.g. Deegan, 2005; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Nayak, 2013; Demir, 2015) highlight the value of learning from research into friendship within different disciplines, while considering the strengths and weaknesses of each discipline’s approach. Therefore, this chapter starts with a review of the existing literature on friendship, particularly children’s friendships, within various disciplines. It highlights the key themes as well as the gaps which my research could contribute to filling. Next, the chapter discusses why the school setting is important when studying children’s friendships, and reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on children’s friendships in school from the perspectives of gender and power. In the last section of this chapter, the focus is on the context of China. Narrowing the focus to the topic of this Ph.D. research, the chapter concludes by reviewing the importance of studying children’s friendships in rural schools, specifically the boarding school setting, in China, from both policy and academic perspectives.

## **2.2 Research on children and friendships**

Philosophers have long discussed the nature of friendship and its significance for a meaningful and happy life (Badhwar, 1993; Lynch, 2015). For philosophers, friendship is connected with ‘love, freedom and choice’, and the



ideal definition of friendship is ‘a voluntary relationship that includes a mutual and equal emotional bond, mutual and equal care and goodwill, as well as pleasure’ (Lynch, 2015:9). Philosophers view mutual positive regard, reciprocal goodwill and love between people who enjoy spending time together as *necessary* conditions to differentiate personal friendship (a practical and emotional relationship) from other forms of interpersonal relationships (Badhwar, 1993; Walker et al., 2016). Philosophical accounts thus locate their discussions within a moral framework and argue that ‘the trust and intimacy of close friendship must be based upon mutual recognition of one another’s virtue’ (Cocking and Kennett, 2000:278). Although the philosophy of friendship provides few discussions that deal particularly with childhood friendship, it has inspired other disciplines to do so. For example, a philosophical perspective of friendship and morality has inspired developmental psychologists’ research into the development of friendship in childhood, investigating what makes a good friendship in childhood, as well as two-way relations between children’s moral development and the formation and direction of their friendships (e.g. Selman, 1981; Bukowski and Sippola, 1998).

Until the end of the 20th century, in comparison with scholars from other disciplines, psychologists, especially developmental psychologists, were the most active participants in friendship studies (Adams and Allan, 1998; Deegan, 2005; Woodhead, 2008). When studying friendships, psychologists (developmental psychologists in particular) typically focus on the outcomes of friendships, such as the quality of friendships, friendship’s functional influences on friends’ adjustment to changes in their lives, and the developmental processes of friendships (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Thus, from the perspective of developmental psychology, children’s friendship is viewed as developing ‘through a sequence of stages which [do] not vary’ (Nayak, 2013:117). This linear and systematic development process is likened to ‘climbing a ladder,’ achieved through children’s ‘age-specific’ (p.118)

developmental processes related to cognitive ability and physical development (Nayak, 2013).

These psychologists refer to friendship as a specific and voluntary interdependence between two people with the intention of facilitating social-emotional goals based on equality, mutual affection or reciprocity of liking (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Hartup and Rubin, 2013; Walker et al., 2016). They believe that reciprocity is the 'deep structure' and the 'social meaning' of friendship, which is maintained relatively unchanged across the life-course (Hartup and Stevens, 1997:356). Thanks to the requirements of reciprocity, mutuality and equality in defining friendship, a strength of the developmental psychological approach to studying friendship lies in the fact that when psychologists ask research participants to identify friendships and nominate friends, 'they are likely capturing "real" friendships' to examine the motivations, influence, outcomes and quality of their reciprocated friendships (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011:7). Although this psychological approach offers an opportunity to investigate a particular friendship that is reciprocally declared by two involved people to be a significantly important relationship, it has been criticized by other disciplines, especially sociology. For example, sociologists criticize psychologists' neglect of the fact that friendship is 'a matter of personal choice and preference' (Ryle, 2015:210) and that different groups of people use the word "friend" inconsistently (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Furthermore, Pahl and Spencer (2004:204) criticize psychological studies for tending to present idealized or paradigmatic cases of friendships rather than discussing the 'negotiated specificities' of actual relationships. This over-emphasis in friendship research on the dyadic and on the most intense and ideal forms of friendships between two individuals, such as "best friend", not only excludes other forms of friendships, thereby limiting the opportunities to establish a comprehensive understanding of this complex and dynamic interpersonal relationship (Allan, 1979), but also reduces studies to the individual level, isolated from broader social structures (Eve, 2002; Pahl, 2002).

Unlike psychologists' "individual focus" in friendship studies, sociologists (e.g. Adams and Allan, 1998; Allan and Adams, 2007) use a broader "individual-social lens" to understand people's friendships: placing friendships in context to build up a connection between friendship – a type of interpersonal relationship between individuals – and surrounding social and cultural environments. Thus, sociologists place considerable emphasis on the *processes* of how various social and cultural contexts shape different groups' constructions of friendship cultures and patterns (Allan, 1979; Allan and Adams, 2007; Corsaro, 2015) and less on the *outcomes* of friendships based on individuals' attributes (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). The key term '*the context*' (emphasis in original), in which friendships are embedded, is defined by Adams and Allan (1998) as:

...the conditions external to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of specific friendships. In other words, we are referring to those elements which surround friendships, but are not directly inherent in them, the extrinsic rather than the intrinsic. (p.4)

Adams and Allan (1998) further explain that *the context* in which to place friendship studies exists on different *levels*. They highlight that only when these different levels of *the context* are considered together can researchers explore the processes through which individuals negotiate the meanings and practices of friendships in their contexts (Adams and Allan, 1998). To be specific, Adams and Allan (1998:6-12) point out four intimately connected levels of context: the 'personal environment level' (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as well as other immediate features of a person's life); the 'network level' (e.g. kinship, family and other network patterns, as well as particular personal relationships with specific embodied obligations and properties); the 'community or subcultural level' (e.g. workplace and other particular communities and subcultures within which individuals are involved and sociability and friendships are embedded); and the 'societal level' (e.g. modernism, industrialism and other particular economic and social structures

that shape the forms of individuals' personal relationships). Thus, the levels proceed from the 'individual level of analysis to levels of analysis more remote from the individual' (Adams and Allan, 1998:6). Although Adams and Allan (1998) have provided detailed examples of elements belonging to different levels of context, they also leave individual researchers flexibility to decide what should be included as *the context* in their own studies of friendships. They suggest that 'the range of extrinsic elements which surround friendships are, in a literal sense, boundless' (p.4); therefore, what should be included as part of *the context* is an open question about the individual researcher's interpretation and judgement based on his or her intention, perspective, and vision of the analysis (Adams and Allan, 1998).

Central to my approach is the sociological insistence that the social contexts of "friendship" and the meanings of what a "friend" is change over time (Nayak, 2013:121). Compared to psychologists, sociologists pay more attention to exploring how people contextually define the meanings of "friend" and "friendship", and "do" friendships in changing social contexts. Based on different studies of friendships in a range of contexts, some common criteria involved in friendships have been widely agreed upon and used by sociologists (Allan, 1979, 1996; Allan and Adams, 2007; Ryle, 2015). For example, friendship is often viewed as a voluntary and informal personal relationship between equals with the same social status (Allan, 1979, 1996), which involves 'a comparatively high degree of liking and solidarity, generally incorporating elements of shared sociability and broad reciprocity of exchange' (Allan and Adams, 2007:124). Other characteristics, such as altruistic sentiment, trust and emotional attachment, as well as commitment and support, and feeling of joy when spending time in friends' company, are also mentioned by scholars as important elements of friendship (e.g. Greco et al., 2015; Ryle, 2015). Although these common criteria involved in friendships largely shape and characterize such interpersonal relationships, sociologists still do not tend to provide a universal definition of friendship (Allan and Adams, 2007). These

sociologists argue that, depending on the contexts within which people are required to define friendships and nominate friends, these same people might at times offer different answers (e.g. Allan, 1979, 1996). For example, 'criteria involved in friendship can be applied more or less strictly' (Allan and Adams, 2007:124): people may be named as "friends" in some situations but as "mates" in other settings (Allan, 1996). A commonly cited explanation of the complex meanings of "friend" and "friendship" in people's usage is offered by Allan and Adams (2007):

Friend is an evaluative term rather than a categorical one. In other words, unlike neighbours, colleagues, or siblings, friends are recognized as such on the basis of subjective judgments of the quality of the relationship they sustain; there are no clear-cut external criteria that can be used to determine whether someone qualifies as a friend. (p.124)

Thus, in contrast with the philosophical and psychological approaches to defining friendships, sociologists, rather than providing an explicit definition of "friendship" from an outsider's viewpoint, often prefer to leave it to the researched people themselves to define their friendships (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Ultimately, one of the key contributions made by sociologists to friendship research is the exploration of the diverse meanings of "friendship" in different social contexts (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). However, this sociological approach to defining friendships in research is problematic from a psychological perspective. As discussed previously, since psychologists mainly study dyadic processes in friendship to explore how people's psychological dispositions shape what happens in friendship dyads (Allan and Adams, 2007), the lack of an explicit definition of "friendship" means that different studies of "friendship" might not be examining the same relationship (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011).

Although the uncertain definition of "friendship" used to pose a methodological challenge to the development of friendship studies in sociology (e.g. Allan, 1979; Ryle, 2015), sociologists' "openness" in defining "friendship" is not a

shortcoming but an advantage when exploring friendships in a group of research subjects' everyday lives in relatively unexplored contexts. This includes the context of the present Ph.D. study, that is, Chinese childhoods in a rural primary boarding school setting: see Section 2.4 in Chapter 2. One reason is that such "openness" could protect researchers from over-emphasizing the dyadic and most intense forms of friendship between individuals (Pahl, 2002; Eve, 2002), thus enabling the researchers to build a clear connection between individuals' knowledge and experiences of friendships and the surrounding social contexts. To be specific, different definitions of friendship offered by researched people may offer platforms for exploring the processes through which these people negotiate the surrounding social contexts to construct their values, understandings and experiences of friendship and simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of such surrounding social contexts.

Further, sociologists' "openness" in defining "friendship" is endorsed by anthropologists in their interpretation of the complex and uncertain meanings of friendships, particularly through rich ethnographic accounts of people's everyday lives in the world's varied societies (Nayak, 2013). In fact, apart from the above sociological perspectives, anthropologists' ethnographic accounts (see Chapter 3) also inspired my research. With ethnography's methodological support, anthropologists gain an immersive understanding of the particular meanings of "friendship" and the contextualized forms of practising friendships in particular social and cultural contexts (Bell and Coleman, 1999). These anthropological discussions of friendship then severely challenge assumptions about it based on communities in Western developed countries (Smart, 1999; Keller, 2004; Desai and Killick, 2010; Nayak, 2013; Demir, 2015). For example, through showing locals' understandings and everyday practices of friendships in a variety of countries, including China, South Africa, India, Lebanon and Peruvian Amazonia, etc., Desai and Killick (2010:1) question whether the assumption that friendship is 'a relationship characterized by autonomy,

sentiment, individualism, lack of ritual and lack of instrumentality' is a 'Western [expression] of friendship imposed on other places and times'.

When placing friendship studies in the context of childhood, the above-mentioned disciplines all have their own specific research interests and approaches. As briefly suggested, developmental psychologists view children's friendships as age-specific and developmental (Hartup and Stevens, 1997; Nayak, 2013). In contrast with this developmental psychological perspective, many sociologists and anthropologists believe that apart from age, sociocultural contexts also play a large part in shaping children's understandings of friendships and experiences around friendships (James, 1993; Pahl, 2000; Nayak, 2013). This insistence on highlighting the importance of social and cultural contexts in studies of children's friendships closely aligns with the positions held in the "new" sociology of childhood (e.g., James et al., 1998; Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2015).

A review of the history of childhood studies suggests that children have been marginalized for such a long time in sociology research (e.g. James and Prout, 2003; Deegan, 2005; Jenks, 2008; Corsaro, 2015) because of their 'subordinate position in societies and in theoretical conceptualizations of childhood and socialization' (Corsaro, 2015:6). For example, in the traditional perspectives on children's socialization, there is a deterministic view of the relationship between society and children, whereby society appropriates children, and the purpose of socialization is to train and prepare them to fit into and internalize the order of the society into which they are born (Corsaro, 2015). This conceptualization of children and childhood is a 'forward-looking way' of viewing children: that is, caring more about what children will become (future adults) than about what they are at present (Corsaro, 2015:6). Thus it is common for childhood not to be considered a topic worthy of interest in itself (James and Prout, 2003:9). As children and childhood were marginalized in societies and theoretical conceptualizations, until the end of 20th century there

was a paucity of sociological studies focusing particularly on childhood friendship (Deegan, 2005).

At the end of the 20th century, the “new” sociology of childhood (e.g., James and Prout, 2003), which developed around the same time as sociologists recognized friendship research as a meaningful topic, contributed significantly to the emergence of “new” sociological studies of children’s friendships (e.g., Corsaro, 2015). This in turn greatly fostered the ‘dehomogenizing and demarginalizing’ of children and their childhood friendships in research (Deegan, 2005:10). The “new” paradigm of the sociology of childhood offered by James and Prout (2003) provided ‘a concise approximation of the salient theoretical and conceptual underpinnings’ (Deegan, 2005:12) of a “new” approach to researching children and childhoods:

Childhood is understood as a social construction.

Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity.

Childhood’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.

Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood.

Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present (see Giddens, 1976).

(James and Prout, 2003:8)

Fundamental to my approach is this sociological paradigm’s contribution to ‘dehomogenizing and demarginalizing’ children and their friendships (Deegan,



2005:10). It appreciates that childhood's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right (James and Prout, 2003). Children's friendships and the cultural meanings they embody (Nayak, 2013) are meaningful in themselves, and not subordinate aspects to be used merely to support the exploration of other research interests. The paradigm also offers theoretical support to the claim that children's experiences of friendships should not be homogenized but need instead to be situated and interpreted within their immediate social contexts (Pahl, 2000; Nayak, 2013). This sociological paradigm challenges developmental psychologists' position of fixing and compartmentalizing childhood into a particular set of life processes that are 'natural' and 'universal' (James and Prout, 2003; Nayak, 2013). Rather, it highlights that children living in different societies can experience different childhoods. Thus, in contextualized childhoods, children's socially constructed friendships (Deegan, 2005) are 'a profoundly *social* affair' (Nayak, 2013:121, emphasis in original), which need to be studied in social contexts.

In addition, this paradigm offers a methodological suggestion in terms of researching children's friendships. This paradigm positions children as competent and active in constructions and reconstructions of both their own lives and the surrounding social environments (Mayall, 2002; James and Prout, 2003; Qvortrup et al., 2009). It criticizes developmental psychologists' position of viewing children as "incompetent" and traditional socialization theories' deterministic model of viewing children as "passive" learners, who are being trained to fit into the social order in which they are living (Corsaro, 2015). In this case, the emergent "new" sociological research on children's friendships emphasizes that children's friendships are actively constructed by children in their own social lives (Deegan, 2005). Thus, in combination with the methodological call for ethnography in the study of childhood (e.g. James and Prout, 2003; Gallagher, 2009b; Nayak, 2013), when a researcher studies children's friendships, children should be viewed as the primary sources of knowledge (Clark and Statham, 2005) and placed at the centre of research.

For example, ethnographic explorations about how children endow friendships with cultural meanings when talking about friends and friendships and how they actually “do” friendships in contexts (Nayak, 2013:118) are increasingly emphasized in sociological research into children’s friendships. In due course, associated with sociologists’ “openness” in defining “friendship” (e.g., Allan, 1979; Ryle, 2015) as discussed previously, these ethnographic explorations of children’s friendships could offer rich data regarding how the children themselves define friendships (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011).

Apart from the above contributions to the sociological studies of children’s friendships, the “new” sociology of childhood also benefits anthropological studies of children’s everyday lives. For instance, the idea of conceptualizing children as “active agents” in the “new” sociology of childhood has encouraged an emergence of “anthropology of childhoods” (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin, 2007). By paying attention to different cultures and societies around the globe, anthropologists provide fascinating and informative descriptions of children’s socially and culturally contextualized friendships to further our understanding of children’s friendships (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Simultaneously, sociological and anthropological research into children’s friendships can also contribute to the further development of the sociology of childhood. Greene and Hogan (2005) argue that, without access to a person’s experience, our understandings about why this person acts as he or she does are very incomplete. Consequently, understanding children’s experiences and how they understand and interpret, negotiate and feel friendships in their daily lives in their socially and culturally constructed childhoods could fundamentally help us to know what it is like to be a child in different contexts. One such context is schools.

## **2.3 Researching children’s friendships in the school setting**

When studying children’s friendships, scholars from different disciplines, such as sociology and psychology, view middle childhood, or the preadolescent

period, as a significant phase of childhood. They suggest that, during this period, children are particularly interested in extending peer groups and interacting with peers to establish and manage relationships and to (re)construct their understandings of these relationships and embedded peer cultures (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Chen et al., 2003; Rubin et al., 2008; Corsaro, 2009, 2015; Rubin et al., 2011). Although there is no universal agreement on the age range of children's middle childhood, scholars (e.g. Rubin et al., 2011) tend to define it as the period between 7 or 8 years old and 12 years old. Since children at this stage are always school-aged, in studies of their friendships, school is commonly viewed by scholars in different disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology, anthropology, and pedagogy) as a significant setting in studies of children's friendships. Hence, this section firstly discusses the importance of the school setting in children's friendship research. Then, it reviews theoretical and empirical literature about children's friendships in school from the perspectives of gender and power.

### **2.3.1 Why does school matter?**

In the school setting, friendships are constructed and practised with diverse peers. Schools, especially state schools, tend to be places where difference and diversity are condensed (Vincent et al., 2018). As a place populated by schoolchildren and adult staff, schools can bring together such diversities as age, generation, gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture, as well as socioeconomic differences (Collins and Coleman, 2008; Vincent et al., 2018). It is here that 'the dynamics and contradictions of friendship' are understood and experienced by children in ways that are more 'uncertain and intense' than in other contexts (Vincent et al., 2018:60). By conducting studies in schools, many scholars (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Adler and Adler, 1998; Davis and Watson, 2001; Mellor, 2006, 2007; Morrison and Burgman, 2009; Harden, 2012; Zhang and Luo, 2016; Vincent et al., 2018) have contributed greatly to understanding children's interpersonal interactions across differences in diverse spaces of the school. Some prime examples are Thorne's (1993) discussion about children's

gendered play at school (e.g. playground and hallways), Deegan's (2005) work on children's friendships in culturally diverse classrooms, Mellor's (2006) stories about children's playground romances, and Zhang and Luo's (2016) study into the inclusion and exclusion experienced by Chinese rural migrant children in their peer relationships at urban public schools. Therefore, locating studies of children's friendships in schools can show the diversity and complexity of friendships between children.

As a place of discipline and surveillance, where attendance is compulsory, schools are one of the key settings through which adults intervene to shape children's childhoods, including their identities, knowledge, relationships, behaviours, and so on (Collins and Coleman, 2008; Taylor, 2012). In school settings, children's use of time and space, especially classrooms, is organized and structured by adult authority's intention to supervise children's social behaviour in a framework of rules and regulations (Collins and Coleman, 2008; Harden, 2012). Indeed, many scholars (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Mayall, 2002; Hadley, 2003; Harden, 2012; Watson and Emery, 2012; Davies, 2015) have argued that children's relationships and interactions with peers in the school setting, especially in classrooms, are far more regulated and governed than those in other settings, such as homes and neighbourhoods. This, it is argued, is because schools, as institutions, require harmonious and conflict-free relationships between children when engaging in school tasks. Therefore, in the school setting, children have limited freedom within which to manage their relationships with school peers. For example, in highly regulated classrooms, children's bodies, emotions and behaviours are tightly controlled (Harden, 2012).

However, this does not mean that children have no freedom. There is 'spatial variability in the degree to which these relationships are freely conducted' (Davies, 2015:21) in school settings. For example, classrooms are far more regulated than other spaces in schools, such as playgrounds and hallways (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Davies, 2015). In addition, even

when children's emotions and behaviours are tightly controlled in highly regulated classrooms, children do not passively accept all of these controls. Rather, they actively negotiate with or even challenge the surrounding school environment to 'subvert and challenge forms of regulation and control' (Harden, 2012:85) in order to gain control over their lives in the process of constructing their everyday school lives with their peers. For example, some everyday objects, such as pencils and toys, are viewed by children as tokens of friendship, which they can barter and exchange with friends (e.g. Corsaro, 1985; Lin, 2017). Since some schools have rules against bringing certain personal objects, such as toys, from home to nursery school, through participant observations, Corsaro (1985) has noticed that children creatively develop strategies to exchange these objects with friends so that they can practise their friendships surreptitiously. Therefore, locating studies of children's friendships in schools can shed light on the processes through which children actively negotiate school rules and teachers' governance and surveillance in disciplined institutions to (re)construe their diverse understandings and practices of friendships (e.g. Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Collins and Coleman, 2008; Harden, 2012; Davies, 2015; Vincent et al., 2018).

In addition, locating studies into children's friendships in school settings can provide an opportunity to understand these friendships in broader social and cultural contexts (e.g. Collins and Coleman, 2008; Vincent et al., 2018). Although the idea of placing friendships in *the context*, as suggested by Adams and Allan (1998), has been discussed mainly with reference to studies about friendships in adulthood, it could also be considered when studying friendships in childhood. School, to some extent, could be viewed as a setting within which researchers could build up *the context* in order to connect children's interpersonal friendships with family/kin and their local communities with the broader social and cultural structure, and thus to better understand the "big picture" of children's friendships, from the individual level to the societal level (Adams and Allan, 1998). To be specific, the diverse nature of schools (Vincent

et al., 2018) could offer a platform for exploring how children's personal features, such as gender (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Mellor, 2006, 2007), influence the characters and patterns of the friendships that they develop and sustain on an individual level (Adams and Allan, 1998). From the perspective of the network level (Adams and Allan, 1998), school is a context in which it is possible to locate children within a wide web of personal relationships (Davies, 2015:50) and so to explore how their friendship experiences (e.g., selection of friends) could be influenced by their participation in personal networks that they are already involved in, such as the teacher-student relationship (Hadley, 2003), or family and kinship relationships (e.g., Rubin and Sloman, 1984; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Collins and Coleman, 2008; Davies, 2015). For example, Collins and Coleman (2008) find that schools, especially primary schools, that serve small areas and demand great levels of parental involvement in supervising the children, could offer parents clear insights into their children's school experiences, including which peers they befriend. School is also a site at which researchers could understand why individual children constructed their friendships with peers in certain ways, through the lens of 'the community and subcultural level' as well as 'the societal level' of surrounding contexts (Adams and Allan, 1998:8-12). As one of the central sites in children's everyday lives, schools can foster a sense of community (Collins and Coleman, 2008; Hansen, 2015). It is here that children experience structural power relationships with adult teachers and share with all participants a set of institutional cultures, values and norms related to their daily shared activities and routines (Corsaro, 2003; Hansen, 2015). Moreover, school is "a pedagogical machine", producing the "useful individuals" required by society', which aims to 'socialize society's members to adhere to the dominant norms and values that underpin it' (Taylor, 2012:230). Therefore, in the school setting, curricula, textbooks and activities, which are designed for the transmission of social, cultural and political norms (e.g., Li, 1990), can reflect the broader social, cultural and political structures of a particular society,

including its assumptions about the ideal types of people in such a society (e.g., Hadley, 2003; Hansen, 2012, 2015).

In this case, studying friendships between children at school could not only give access to the complexity and diversity of friendships but could also offer an opportunity for exploration of how children interact with different levels of surrounding contexts – e.g., contexts ranging from an individual's gender identity to family relationships, subcultures in school and peer groups, and society's sociocultural values – to construct particular understandings and practices of friendship. When studying children's friendships in the school setting, there are various perspectives, including friendships and play (e.g., Thorne, 1993; Mellor, 2006), friendships and school adjustment/achievement (e.g., Chen et al., 2004; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011), friendships and behaviour/wellbeing at school (e.g., Lu and Ye, 2009; Morrison and Burgman, 2009; An, 2015), and cooperation, competition and conflicts in friendships (e.g., George and Browne, 2000; Corsaro, 2003; Carter and Nutbrown, 2016), etc. Among these perspectives, "gender" and "power" are two important themes.

### **2.3.2 Gender and power as important factors in shaping children's friendships at school**

Gender differences in friendship have been discussed from many perspectives, such as friendship group size, the level of intimacy (e.g. intimate self-disclosure) within friendships, and the styles of interactions between friends, as well as abilities, spaces and approaches for making and keeping friends (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Allan, 1996; Oliker, 1998; James and James, 2012; Ryle, 2015). For instance, gender difference in friendships is often characterized by females' face-to-face friendships and males' side-by-side friendships; in the majority of cases, female friendships are viewed as more intimate, with a high degree of shared feelings and emotions, while male

friendships are described as less intimate and based on shared activities and interests (Ryle, 2015:215).

Gender identities<sup>3</sup>, with socially and culturally constructed meanings (girls' femininity and boys' masculinity), have been offered as a reason for such gender difference. Through exploring the role of friendship in the cultures of girls in a primary school classroom, Kehily and her colleagues (2002) argue that:

Notions of friendship and patterns of friendship within children's cultures can be seen as constitutive of sex-gender identities. [...] being friends/breaking friends can be understood as a technique that can be utilised by children in the regulation and negotiation of gendered identities and the production of differentiated sex-gender hierarchies. (p.167)

Some scholars (e.g. Thorne, 1993; James and James, 2012; Ryle, 2015) argue that the femininity and masculinity that are operative in some groups have been taken as indisputable norms for girls' and boys' friendships. For example, according to George and Browne (2000), girls in their study believe that emotional intimacy is the most important aspect of friendship. Yet, due to the stereotypes of masculinity in boys' culture, boys tend to find it difficult to form such close and intimate friendships (Frosh et al., 2002; James and James, 2012). However, such widely accepted discussions about gendered friendships have been questioned by some other scholars. They argue that, in

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<sup>3</sup> Identity is a complex concept which has been conceptualized in different ways, depending on researchers' theoretical approaches and disciplinary standpoints (Kustatscher, 2015). In line with this project's position of social constructionism (see Chapter 3), this thesis defines the notion of identity following Richard Jenkins's (2008) argument that one's identities are multi-dimensional and plural, and that identities, which 'can only be understood as a process of "being" or "becoming"' (p.17), are always constructed in interactions and relationships with others. Identities then offer us 'a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities' (Jenkins, 2008:5). Gender is a person's 'primary identity, organising the earliest experience and integrated into the individual sense of selfhood' (Jenkins, 2008:70). Gender identities are not solely limited to biological sex but also need to be understood as a social construction (Konstantoni, 2011). In current social discourses and academia, the male-female binary of gender identities has been challenged by the concepts contributed by LGBTQ communities (Elizabeth, 2013). However, in this thesis, because I did not observe LGBTQ groups in my fieldwork, discussions of gender in children's peer friendships at school focus on the gender binary of boy-girl.



the mainstream research on gender and friendship, there is a risk of overemphasizing the gender differences in friendships. Ryle (2015), for instance, maintains that when researchers set out to look for the gender difference in friendship, there will be 'a predisposition to find it and make something of a big deal out of it, even if it's a relatively small difference' (p.220). This assumption of gender differences in children's friendships may lead to overlooking the intimate and close friendships that boys do actually form (Thorne, 1993; James and James, 2012; Ryle, 2015). In fact, when considering the forms of intimacy in relationships (Morgan, 2011), it is seen that girls and boys both have intimate friendships (Ryle, 2015), but their intimate friendships might be presented in different forms for certain sociocultural reasons, such as fulfilling the ideas of femininity and masculinity.

In general, "intimacy" seems to refer to a particular quality of a relationship, involving loving, caring and sharing (Morgan, 2011:35). To paraphrase Morgan's (2011) study into intimacy in family practices, "intimacy" is defined as consisting of three forms:

1. Embodied intimacy, which refers to embodied caring as well as everyday touching;
2. Emotional intimacy, which includes 'sharing and disclosure [and] understanding of the other which is not simply at the verbalised level';
3. Intimate knowledge, which 'emerges out of embodied or emotional intimacy but is more to do with the interweaving of personal biographies over a period, often a considerable period, of time'.

(Morgan, 2011:35)

Following Morgan's definitions of intimacy, Davies (2015) argues that, in children's friendships, intimacy is formed on a basis of mutual intimate knowledge. However, there are few empirical examples that could be used to support this argument. Davies (2015) explains that, as more attention has

been paid to exploring intimacy in children's relationships within families, we know less about how they practise intimacy in other relationships, such as friendship. Moreover, because intimacy is 'not a one-dimensional phenomenon, but may be understood in different, and not always congruent, ways' (Morgan, 2011:35), Morgan's definitions of intimacy might not fit all contexts. Thus, and pertinent for this study, contexts need to be taken into account to explore in these various ways different children's understandings and practices of intimacy in their friendships.

Although gender differences and gender separation (e.g. Thorne, 1993) result in the majority of friendship groups being same-sex, cross-gender friendships are an important part of children's friendship experiences with their peers. When studying children's relationships with peers in the school setting, children's play, as a natural part of children's world (Smith, 2009), is highly valued. Numerous scholars have gained insights into children's gendered friendships by ethnographically observing boys and girls at play. Through ethnographically thick descriptions of boys' and girls' play in school, these scholars provide rich descriptions of how children actively negotiate and practise gender, sexuality and friendship with same-sex and other-sex peers in school settings (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Kehily et al., 2002; Renold, 2005; Mellor, 2006). For example, through ethnographic fieldwork in two US primary school settings, Thorne (1993) introduces the terms "borderwork" and "crossing" to define how boys and girls strengthen gender boundaries by forming single-sex friendship groups and cross-gender boundaries, then transgress the lines through contradictory and ambivalent interactions when playing various games in contextualized situations. When studying cross-gender interactions between boys and girls in the public world of the schoolyard, scholars notice that cross-gender relationships include more hostile (e.g., teasing) than friendly behaviours (James, 1993). This hostile relation between boys and girls is closely linked with sexuality (Mellor, 2006; Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Thus,

learning how children interact with other-sex friends could suggest a vivid picture of how children negotiate sexualities when practising their friendships.

In many empirical studies (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Redman, 1996; Renold, 2005), schools are viewed as significant cultural sites where children produce, reproduce and contest their sexualities (Redman, 1996). When locating children's active engagement in producing sexualities in the school context, the playground is frequently highlighted as a significant space where children learn and practise knowledge and awareness of sexualities through play (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Renold, 2005; Mellor, 2006; Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Beyond the playground, scholars (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Kehily et al., 2002; Renold, 2005) point to other public and private sites, such as classrooms, toilets, hallways, corridors, and cloakrooms, which could provide spaces for children's covert and overt sexual performance. Renold (2005:33) highlights how some 'boys and girls subject to sexual teasing and harassment appropriate private spaces (e.g. bushes or "wildlife" area) to circumvent and directly avoid the often cruel scrutiny of "the public" (peer) gaze'.

Although the school setting plays such an important role in understanding the connections between children's cross-gender relationships and their practices of sexualities, it seems that a type of conflict arises when children's knowledge and practices of sexuality in school are considered. For example, because of the historical separation between the child and the adult worlds, which has hinged almost wholly on children's exclusion from (adult) realms of sexuality (Renold, 2005:19), a number of scholars (e.g. Renold, 2005; Mellor and Epstein, 2006) argue that, in school settings, even young children could be 'aware of adults' need for childhood innocence' (Holford et al., 2013:712). Thus, when children explore sexuality with each other, they need to find ways to 'circumvent adult scrutiny and allay suspicion' (Best, 1983:109) so as to keep such practices secret (Holford et al., 2013) and safe from adult surveillance. Combined with previous discussions of the nature and discipline of school and the unbalanced power relationship between teachers and

students, these findings suggest that, in school settings, teachers' attitudes could significantly shape the patterns of interaction amongst children.

In addition to the gender perspective, children's experience of power imbalance ("power over") in relationships with teachers and other peers in the school setting is another significant element that could shape children's friendship experiences. Power is a key concept in childhood studies, but how to understand the notion of power is contested (Blaisdell, 2016:47). Allen (1998, 2016) discusses the debates that have arisen around the conceptions of power as 'power-over' and 'power-to'. Allen (2016) explains that power-over others refers to an exercise of 'getting someone else to do what you want them to do' (p.2), while one's power-to do something means 'an ability or a capacity to act' (p.2). According to Allen (2016), having reviewed and compared different scholars' ways of conceptualizing power, Michel Foucault's work on power 'presupposes that power is a kind of power-over' (p.2). The Foucauldian conception of power has a significant influence on childhood scholars' research on children's experiences of everyday relationships with others, especially adults, such as student-teacher relationships at school and child-parent relationships at home (e.g., Gallagher, 2008, 2009b, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Blaisdell, 2016). In this thesis, I conceptualize power in line with Foucauldian ideas, following Gallagher's (2011) Foucauldian conception of power as 'something that is exercised rather than possessed' and as 'any action or actions which attempt to influence another action or actions' (p.48). Since this project (see research question 3) was interested in power imbalance in relationships (e.g., student-teacher relationships, child-parent relationships and friendships), in this thesis, "power over" is used to describe that type of power imbalance.

While the above discussion of the nature and discipline of schools considered the unbalanced power relationship between teachers and children (teachers have power over children), here the focus is placed on the power imbalance between children and their peers (some children having power over other

peers) in schools. Although friendship is 'placed firmly on similarity and equivalence', and is 'not about status hierarchy or difference [but] about solidarity on the basis of liking and trust' (Allan, 1996:89, 97), that does not mean that hierarchy and difference are absent from friendship groups (James and James, 2012). In fact, since children in middle childhood have an increasing interest in expanding friendship groups and pay increasing attention to acceptance, popularity and group solidarity (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Corsaro, 2015), they are likely to experience power imbalances in expanded friendship groups (George and Browne, 2000; Goodwin, 2006; Stoudt, 2006). For example, when some dyadic pairings come together to constitute a larger friendship clique, girls' friendship groups have a hierarchical structure, with leaders, "inner circle" members and others who are in the "peripheral circle" (e.g. George and Browne, 2000). In boys' friendship groups, peer disciplining and hierarchical power structures exist to shape each individual boy's behaviours (e.g. Stoudt, 2006). This experience of hierarchy in friendship groups could influence children's feelings and emotions when interacting with friends in the groups. George and Brown (2000) claim that girls, as leaders in the friendship groups, could feel confident when interacting with friends because they know that other girls want to be their friends; however, girls with lower positions in a friendship group hierarchy could feel less secure and would vie with each other to be the one who has the closest friendship with the leaders. In Stoudt's (2006) study, some schoolboys express ambivalence toward friendship group power structures and the disciplining behaviours of powerful peers. They view such hierarchical power structures and peer disciplining as training for the outside world, but at the same time they may have had a negative experience of hazing.

While hierarchical power structures in friendship groups could be experienced by children in any setting, the intensity of school might strengthen such power imbalance. As previously discussed, since children are surrounded by a large number of peers in school settings on an everyday basis, their experiences in

friendship groups are shaped not only by their inner-group relationships but also by their broader relationships and their interactions with other peers from outside their cliques (Adler and Adler, 1998). In this case, different degrees of popularity among peers could cause children to have different degrees of power (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Goodwin, 2006; Stoudt, 2006). The central positions in friendship groups, such as leaders, are always occupied by these popular children (Goodwin, 2006). “Popular children” are defined as being those ‘who are the most influential in setting group opinions and who have the greatest impact on determining the boundaries of membership in the most exclusive social groups’ (Corsaro, 2015:222). Several scholars have pointed out a range of different and gendered factors which could influence children’s popularity amongst peers and shape their friendship experiences. These factors include, such as, masculinity and athletic ability for boys, and physical appearance and good academic performance for girls (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Stoudt, 2006; Allen, 2013; Corsaro, 2015).

However, within different sociocultural contexts, different elements might contribute to boys’ and girls’ popularity amongst their peers. For example, in studies with working-class boys in Western countries, academic performance has been found to be a less important factor than masculine identity in making a boy popular with his peers (e.g. Allen, 2013). Nonetheless, in the Chinese context, both boys and girls with good academic performance are defined as “ideal” or “good” children/students (e.g. Xu et al., 2006) and are also popular amongst their peers (e.g. Chen et al., 1997, 2004). In the particular context of Chinese schooling, apart from this academic-oriented evaluation system, schools’ organizing systems could also shape each individual child’s degree of popularity among peers. For example, based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Chinese school, Hansen (2012, 2015) claims that the student leader system, which is commonly employed in Chinese schools, causes significant power imbalances between children, as those who are not student leaders are required by the school authorities to obey those who are.

In sum, this section reviews the diverse nature and the discipline of school settings; it considers how schools offer multi-level contexts to support our understandings of children's friendship; it highlights "gender" and "power" as two important factors in shaping children's friendships at school. Therefore, it offers an insight into children's friendships at school in general. However, as discussed previously, the broader societal context matters in friendship studies (Adams and Allan, 1998). Therefore, the next section will furtherly discuss the specific backgrounds and gaps in terms of researching rural Chinese children's friendships with peers at school.

## **2.4 Researching rural Chinese children's friendships at school**

As explained in the introduction to this chapter, because of my personal experience of working with rural Chinese children in schools in rural areas of China, I am particularly interested in children's friendships in the rural school setting. Childhood friendships at school is not a well-developed topic within the existing literature about Chinese children's experiences, and even less attention is paid to such research in the context of rural schools. However, that does not mean that this topic is totally ignored. In fact, childhood friendship is often deemed to provide an important perspective when discussing more "popular" topics related to Chinese children's school lives, such as bullying, wellbeing, sexual education, academic achievement, development of morality in moral education, and awareness of Confucianism (e.g. Chen et al., 2004, 2006; Farrer, 2006; Lu and Ye, 2009; Yang, 2012; Growing Home, 2015; Yin et al., 2017). To different extents and from different perspectives, these works all contribute to our understanding of Chinese children's friendships in urban or rural schools. Moreover, these studies offer a lens through which we can uncover particular social, cultural and political aspects of China which shape children's friendships in school at the societal level. Therefore, by combining this China-focused literature with the previously reviewed friendship studies, especially those on children's friendships in school, from around the world and from different disciplines, this section discusses how the current literature

inspired my study and the gaps which my research can contribute to closing, from two perspectives.

#### **2.4.1 An urgent policy-oriented call for an immersive understanding of rural Chinese children's friendships**

In the People's Republic of China, since 1986, nine years of compulsory education have been legislated for all children (beginning at age six), following national curricula under the supervision of the government (O'Neill, 2018:25). Since the end of the 20th century, Chinese governments have issued a range of policies for educational reform, such as the China National Plan for Education Reform and Development (*zhongguo jiaoyu gaige he fazhan gangyao*) in 1993, the Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Pilot) (*jichu jiaoyu kecheng gaige gangyao*) in 2001, and the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) in 2010. One key discussion in relation to the above-mentioned policies centred on the change in pedagogical approach from one that was 'traditional knowledge-centered, domain-centered, and teacher-centered' "examination-oriented education" (*yingshi jiaoyu*) (Wang, 2013:8) to one that offered "quality education" (*suzhi jiaoyu*), a student-centred educational style with a holistic focus on children's all-round development. This style emphasizes not only the importance of knowledge but also the development of children's psychological and physical health, "proper" social, cultural and moral values, and aesthetic appreciation (e.g. Sun, 1999; Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

Holistic "quality education" in China has a national orientation because it is aimed at developing the whole person not only to achieve personal goals, such as knowledge or psychological and physical health, but also to 'meet the needs of the nation' (Dello-Iacovo, 2009:242). For example, as will be further discussed later in this section, moral education, as a compulsory component of education, not only reflects China's traditional views on centralizing morality in education (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). It also stands as a response to the values,



such as materialism, individualism and capitalism, that are arriving increasingly from without and challenging Chinese society's dominant social and political values, such as Confucianism, collectivism and communism (e.g. Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2006; Yu, 2008; Bannister, 2013). Since the ultimate goal of "quality education" in China is the country's national strength (Dello-lacovo, 2009:242), the contents of this type of education are continuously updated in response to the issues of the moment.

In today's Chinese society, with increasing reports of children and young people's misbehaviour and negative social experiences (school bullying, abuse, and suicide), there is great concern about children's psychological health and their social and emotional capacities to deal with others, particularly during their primary and middle school ages (e.g. Shi and Li, 2013; Lin and Yao, 2014). Thus, the National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), and Core Competencies and Values for Chinese Students' Development (*zhongguo xuesheng fazhan hexin suyang*) were drawn up in 2010 and in 2016 respectively. Both documents placed particular emphasis on ensuring children's mental health through "quality education" aimed at improving their social and emotional abilities to deal appropriately with others (Lin and Yao, 2014; UNICEF, 2019).

However, in China, differing levels of economic development and governments' unequal political, financial and social support for the development of basic education in urban and rural areas have caused a significant and persistent urban-rural gap in the provision and quality of basic education (Hannum, 1999, 2003; Tan, 2003; Bao, 2005; Dello-lacovo, 2009; Wang, 2009, 2013). In comparison with urban schools, educational practices proposed as part of "quality education" are less developed in rural schools (Wang, 2009, 2013). On the contrary, teacher-centred, knowledge-focused and examination-oriented education persists in most parts of rural China (e.g. Li, 1999; Bao, 2005; Dello-lacovo, 2009; Wang, 2009, 2013). It is thus likely that, compared with that of urban children, rural children's mental health and development of

their social and emotional capacities to deal with relationships with others have not been given enough attention in everyday school education.

One of the significant obstacles that restrict the development of “quality education” in rural China is rural people’s lower level of agreement on the importance of “quality education” (e.g., Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Because of the significant gap in quality of life that stems from different degrees of economic development in rural and urban areas, rural people expect to gain opportunities to leave their villages and live in cities as modern, urban people with a better standard of living (e.g. Li, 1999; Wang, 2009, 2013). Examinations, such as “*gaokao*”, the mandatory national examination for entering university, are the main means by which China selects people from its large population to access its limited educational resources (Salili et al., 2001; Ye and Yao, 2001). Consequently, in rural areas, the main gauge of success remains passing examinations, viewed as ‘the only real way’ (p.246) for rural children to enter universities in urban cities and stay there to gain jobs and household registrations, and to escape their forebears’ identities as rural people (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Thus, in rural areas, “quality education” which focuses on children’s all-round development, including capacities such as dealing with relationships with others, does not seem as effective as examination-oriented education in terms of helping children to succeed in important exams and thereby achieve educational goals (Wang, 2013).

Apart from the less-appreciated importance of children’s capacities to deal with relationships with others in the underdeveloped “quality education”, rural children might also face tougher challenges to their mental health and wellbeing compared to urban children. This is especially true when considering the consequences of the national policy called School Merging (*cedian bingxiao*) and the wave of rural to urban labour migration (*jiincheng dagong*). One significant result is that a large number of children study at boarding schools (*jisu xuexiao*) as residential students (*jisu sheng*) from a young age, away from family support (Huang, 2004; Fan and Sang, 2005; Lu and Ye, 2009;

Yang, 2012; Duan et al., 2013; Bai and Fan, 2014; Hansen, 2015; Growing Home, 2015; Pan, 2017). China's 2010 national population census reports that more than 60 million Chinese children in rural areas have migrant parent(s) (ACWF, 2013). Many of these "left-behind children" (*liushou ertong*) enrol as residential students (Ye et al., 2005ab). However, it is not only children of migrant parents who experience schooling as residential students. Many rural children without migrant parents also attend such schools as a result of the national policy of school merging. This policy began to be put into practice in 1995, and was formally and widely implemented across China between 2001 and 2012 (Pan, 2017). The aim of the policy was to optimize the distribution of educational resources and to improve the quality of compulsory education. Because of this school merging process, many rural communities lost their small-sized schools and many rural children had to leave their local communities to attend schools far away from home. This school merging policy is criticized for undermining rural children's educational experiences, since being a residential student at a very young age might negatively affect a child's wellbeing (Liu, 2011). Although the policy was abandoned in 2012, it was fully practised for more than 15 years, until 2010, with the result that China still has over 33 million children who are residential students engaged in the nine years of universal compulsory education (Dong, 2015). As residential students (some of whom are children of migrant parent(s) as well), spending a long time at school away from their families' company and support, rural children in boarding schools are commonly reported as easily feeling stressed and experiencing negative emotions, such as loneliness and insecurity (e.g. Yang, 2012; Growing Home, 2015; Hansen, 2015).

Due to increasing awareness of the importance of rural children's mental health and wellbeing, the Chinese government has released a series of policies and practices with which to address this issue (UNICEF, 2019). For example, since 2011, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and UNICEF have jointly released the Social and Emotional Learning

Project (SEL Project) and conducted pilot studies in rural schools in China (e.g. Shi and Li, 2013; Liu, 2015a). Up to the end of 2018, the SEL Project was introduced to 525 rural schools in 11 provinces (UNICEF, 2019). This idea was adapted from Western countries' (e.g., the US, the UK and Australia) practices of involving social and emotional learning in the school programme (Shi and Li, 2013). Current practices within the SEL Project in China aim to create a supportive and inclusive school environment that promotes children's capacity to develop self-awareness and social awareness, to establish positive interpersonal relationships, to recognize and manage emotions, and to conduct effective communication and decision-making (UNICEF, 2019:15). To achieve this aim, the SEL Project team runs several sub-projects, including designing a social and emotional learning plan, conducting teachers' training, developing social and emotional learning course modules and materials, encouraging home-school cooperation, etc. (Yang, 2014; Liu, 2015a; Guo, 2017; UNICEF, 2019).

Locating this SEL Project in rural schools has particular meaning for those children who are residential students in boarding schools. Due to the absence of close family, school peers and teachers take on greater significance (Hansen, 2015). For example, children in boarding schools place great emphasis on friendships with peers to provide enjoyable company and support in dealing with academic difficulties, negative emotions and other issues at school (Ye et al., 2005ab; Lu and Ye, 2009; Li, 2012; Li, 2015; Hansen, 2015; An, 2015; Growing Home, 2015). Some scholars argue that positive experiences with peers, especially friends, and with teachers can offer powerful support in helping these rural children in boarding schools to deal with emotional and social difficulties, such as school bullying, and can improve their emotional wellbeing (e.g. An, 2015; Dong, 2015; Li, 2015; Yin et al., 2017). Thus, supporting children so as to enhance mutual respect, understanding and support in relationships with peers and teachers at school is an important focus of this SEL Project (Yang, 2014; Liu, 2015a; UNICEF, 2019).

Although Western theories and practices, including teaching plans and educational materials, inspired this China-based project (Shi and Li, 2013; Lin and Yao, 2014; Liu, 2015a; UNICEF, 2019), they could not be entirely reproduced in China because of the significant differences in social, cultural and historical backgrounds and political and social environments. Without enough in-depth understanding of the current elements of rural Chinese children's social and emotional experience, such as their everyday relationships with others in the school setting, scepticism could arise as to whether or not this programme has been well enough adapted to the particular sociocultural context of rural China to effectively help Chinese children, rather than to merely echo Western countries' practices. Therefore, adapting Western countries' practices of social and emotional learning around the particularities of China's local conditions is important (UNICEF, 2019). As a result, one key task for this China-based SEL Project is to collect abundant empirical data with which to develop in-depth understanding of rural Chinese children's social and emotional experiences in school, such as their relationships with peers and teachers, and so to ensure that the project can respond well to their particular needs (Guo, 2017).

However, in the current Chinese literature, there are limited in-depth discussions of what these rural Chinese children's relationships with others, especially peer friendships at school, look like. Although friendship with peers is commonly considered important in developing rural children's emotional wellbeing at school, the subject has always been mixed with discussions of children's general relationships with school peers (e.g. Ye et al., 2005ab; Lu and Ye, 2009; Li, 2012; Li, 2015; Hansen, 2015; An, 2015; Growing Home, 2015). Moreover, as will be discussed further in the following subsection about China as a particular cultural and political context, in most of the current literature that mentions children's friendships in school, the boundary between friends and classmates is unclear and the two labels are often equated (e.g. Lu and Ye, 2009). This phenomenon has also been observed by several

Western scholars. Bagwell and Schmidt (2011) highlight that ‘teachers and parents may refer to all children’s classmates as “friends”’ (p.7). However, in studies that focus on children’s friendships from the children’s perspectives (e.g. Corsaro, 2003), in the children’s accounts not all classmates are referred to as “friends” in all situations. Furthermore, children often classify friends into different levels, such as best friends, close friends and common friends (e.g. Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). This suggests that the boundary between friends and classmates might not be always unclear from these Chinese rural children’s own perspectives. The fact that the boundary is unclear in much of the literature could indicate that these discussions are based on studies from an adult perspective, with little or no inclusion of the children’s own points of view. For example, in Yang’s (2012) collection of diaries of children with migrant parents, the children clearly referred to certain school peers as “friends” but to others as “classmates”.

Thus, as a result of my personal experiences and research interests, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, I chose to use this work to contribute to closing this gap through a child-centred study of rural Chinese children’s everyday friendships with peers in the boarding school setting, considering not only the “what”, but also the “how” and the “why”. I viewed this research choice as an appropriate response to the urgent policy need for focused and immersive studies aimed at deeply understanding the situation surrounding rural Chinese children’s everyday relationships with others in the school setting. It can support the adjustment and development of educational policies and practices focused on children’s interpersonal relationships (see Chapter 8). In seeking to achieve this goal, a sociological perspective was helpful.

#### **2.4.2 An academic call for a sociological understanding of rural Chinese children’s friendships**

In Chinese literature, psychological studies, compared with other disciplines, dominate explorations of rural Chinese children’s relationships with peers in

school settings. Given psychologists' particular research interests (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011) and Chinese politicians' and scholars' concerns with the consequences of lack of family support in rural Chinese children's development (e.g., ACWF, 2013), many of these psychological studies are especially focused on the negative "outcomes" of the surrounding environmental influences on children's psychological development and experiences in peer relationships (e.g., Duan and Zhou, 2005; Xiao, 2007; Lu and Ye, 2009; An, 2015). This is especially so in the case of children of migrant parent(s). However, as claimed in Chapter 1, I did not want to concentrate on or assume negative outcomes of rural Chinese children's interpersonal relationships, but to explore the complexity and diversity of Chinese children's understandings and everyday practices of peer friendships in the boarding school setting (see Chapter 1). Therefore, a sociological perspective was helpful.

As previously discussed, the "new" sociology of childhood conceptualizes childhood and approaches working with children by exploring their social lives from their own perspectives (e.g. James and Prout, 2003; Greene and Hogan, 2005). Therefore, given the strength of sociological studies of friendships in general, and childhood in particular (e.g. Deegan, 2005; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Nayak, 2013), sociological studies based on an ethnographic methodology (see Chapter 3) can provide a meaningful perspective from which to develop in-depth understandings of rural Chinese children's friendships in boarding schools. Thus they can contribute to the process of "dehomogenizing", "demarginalizing" (Deegan, 2005:10) and indeed "destigmatizing" rural children and their friendships in the context of China. These significant contributions of the sociological perspective are gained through exploring how children understand and practise friendships in a variety of ways and how important social and cultural contexts are in shaping these friendships.

#### 2.4.2.1 Exploring the complexity in children's understandings of friendships and diversity in their practices of friendships

Central to my approach is the access provided by the sociological lens to the complexity of researched people's understandings of "friendship" and "friend" (Allan, 1979; Allan and Adams, 2007; Ryle, 2015), as well as to the diversity in the process of "doing" friendships (Allan and Adams, 2007).

In Chinese literature, many of the dominant psychological studies suggest an "outcome-focused" and "problem-driven" position according to which rural Chinese children, particularly those deprived of family support (e.g., having migrant parent(s) and/or being residential students from a young age) easily experience psychological risks and difficulties (e.g., problematic emotional and behavioural issues) when dealing with relationships with others (Tan, 2011; Bai and Fan, 2014; An, 2015). The concern presented by these psychological studies over the surrounding environment's negative influence on these rural Chinese children in their psychological development has helped significantly to provide a political focus and garner social support from the whole of Chinese society for helping these children (e.g., The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016; UNICEF, 2019). However, over-reliance on this "outcome-focused" and "problem-driven" position can be problematic.

Excessive emphasis on targeting, describing and analysing the negative "outcomes" of the surrounding environmental influences on these rural Chinese children's relationships with others creates the risk of marginalizing and stigmatizing this group of children (Ren, 2008; Shen et al., 2009; Tong and An, 2013; Tang and Jiang, 2014). The approach not only fails to appreciate these rural Chinese children's ability to actively respond to and negotiate the surrounding environment in the process of understanding and practising relationships with others (Tan, 2011); it also risks labelling and stigmatizing them, especially those with migrant parent(s), as "less-developed" and "problematic" children (e.g. Zhou et al., 2005; Ren, 2008). Although



professionals and scholars increasingly recognize the importance of empowerment and stigma reduction (Tan, 2011) in the process of helping these vulnerable rural Chinese children to have a better future, a lack of space for letting children express their own thinking is a key obstacle (Pu, 2008). Therefore, in my research, a sociological approach can meaningfully contribute to the aim of empowerment and stigma reduction through improving knowledge of these rural Chinese children's relationships with others, and in particular friendships with peers at boarding school, to challenge 'the deeply held attitudes and beliefs of powerful groups that lead to labelling, stereotyping, setting apart, devaluing, and discriminating' (Link and Phelan, 2001:381).

A sociological perspective can add a vivid picture of these rural Chinese children's diverse practices of friendship with peers in the boarding school setting. In Western-based studies, a large number of sociologists (e.g. Corsaro, 1985, 2003; Thorne, 1993; Mellor, 2006, 2007; Frønes, 2009) have provided detailed and rich pictures of how children negotiate time, spaces and rules in school settings to practise friendships. These in-depth discussions not only present how boys and girls actively construct their contextualized friendships, but also explore children's different patterns of friendship practice in different contexts (e.g. time and space, with different degrees of teacher supervision and surveillance). For example, the practices of children and their friends in the classroom when supervised by teachers might not be the same as those in other spaces, such as the playground, where there is a lower level of supervision (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Unfortunately, research including such detailed discussions of "doing" friendship is almost entirely missing from studies of children's friendships in rural boarding schools in China. However, Hansen's (2012, 2015) ethnographic work about Chinese adolescents' everyday life in rural high school has significantly inspired my work. Although Hansen's focus is not on children's friendship, she draws a detailed picture of how children talk, laugh and play during short breaks and activities, such as

meals, PE class, laundry and cleaning chores. Hansen (2012:125) claims that boarding school provides 'authorities (educational, political, and religious) with power to organize not only student's academic activities, but also their ways of living during a given period'. In this case, the particular organization of Chinese boarding schools could impose a contextualized way of living that significantly influences children's practices of school friendships. As Hansen (2012, 2015) claims, Chinese boarding schools always have a very tightly structured and busy timetable and enforce school rules that regulate behaviour in different spaces, such as classrooms, playgrounds and dormitory rooms. The present thesis will explore how Chinese boys and girls negotiate time and spaces in school to practise friendships. Hence, the way Chinese boarding schools' environments shape the forms and experiences of friendship can offer a illuminating picture of these children's daily involvement in doing friendships in boarding school contexts.

A sociological perspective can provide opportunities to research the complexity of these rural Chinese children's understandings of friendships from their own perspectives. From my experiences, as I noted in the introductory chapter, adults might apply certain "taken-for-granted" evaluation criteria of "friendship" when judging children's practices of friendship (see Chapter 1). Such "taken-for-granted" evaluation criteria of relationships (particularly the "good" relationships: see an example of "good" friendship in Chapter 7) could be one reason for the previously discussed "problem-driven" position found in many psychological studies of rural Chinese children's relationships with others. Using my study of children's friendships as an example, neglect of the complexity of the meaning and patterns of "friendship/friend" risks simplifying the answer to what children count as "friendship" and "friend" in school contexts. In most studies of rural Chinese children's friendship experiences at boarding schools, friendship is examined mainly in terms of its affective and emotional aspect (e.g. Li, 2012; An, 2015; Dong, 2015; Ren and Treiman, 2016), because of the tendency to focus on

connections between friendship and psychological development and emotional wellbeing. However, although emotional and affective intimacy in friendship is indeed commonly considered a crucial criterion of friendship, children might form friendship groups on different bases and highlight different aspects of friendship in different contexts (e.g. George and Browne, 2000). For example, the instrumental aspect of friendship (the ways in which friends/friendships may be helpful or useful) also seems to be a key element when Chinese children select friends at school (Chen et al., 2004). Therefore, there is a need for greater awareness of the complexity of friendships' meaning and patterns, to avoid oversimplifying these rural Chinese children's friendships at school.

Further, pertinent for my study, this sociological perspective which takes account of the complexity of friendship and the diversity of friendship practices can not only add meaningful "findings" but can also bring a methodological contribution to such studies in China. Reviews of the methods used by different scholars (particularly when they come from different disciplines, such as psychology and sociology) when studying friendships and children always suggest a methodological debate (e.g., Allan, 1979; Gallagher, 2009b; Corsaro, 2015). In the field of my research, the size of a friendship group (i.e. how many (good) friends a child has) is commonly viewed as a key factor when measuring children's abilities for forming and maintaining friendships. These rural Chinese children are frequently asked to calculate the number of friends they have and name them, especially the good friends with whom they have formed a close attachment (e.g. Zhou and Duan, 2006; Xiao, 2007; Ren and Treiman, 2016). However, people tend to apply stricter criteria when determining whether someone qualifies as a friend when questioned about their friendships in a formal research setting than they do in more casual settings (e.g. Allan, 1996; Allan and Adams, 2007). Thus, although researchers might be able to investigate the most intense forms of friendships, such as "best friends" (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011) that are declared as such

by both children involved, they might ignore other types of friendships. This risk of oversimplifying the forms of friendship could lead to findings about these rural Chinese children's friendships being limited to only the most intimate kinds, which could not be used when the researcher 'extrapolates and analyses friendship in general' (Allan, 1979:36). Moreover, since friendships are dynamic, children might nominate different peers as their friends over time (e.g. Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Thus, the commonly used data collection methods – one-off, pre-designed and structured questionnaires and interviews – can risk limiting children's nominations of friends when they are asked to identify their friendship network in restricted "question-answer" styled research.

Another more serious flaw in these "question-answer" styled studies is a lack of detailed discussion of how researchers work with children to come to an agreement about what friendship is and the meaning of "friend" or "good friend", before asking children to answer related questions (e.g. Ren and Treiman, 2016). It seems that these scholars might hold a position that the meanings of the terms "friend" and "friendship" are self-evident at an everyday level, and are not sensitive to questioning assumptions that we 'take for granted' (Allan, 1979). Hence, it could be argued that discussions of these rural Chinese children's friendships at boarding school are fundamentally based on a problematic assumption: that children and adults understand and define "friendship" and "friend" in the same way, which might not be true (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Some adults might broadly and inclusively assume that children's friends are the peers with whom they spend a considerable amount of time on an everyday basis (e.g. Corsaro, 2003). However, from the children's perspective, the peers with whom they closely interact every day might not all be considered "friends". Therefore, an ethnographic approach to working with children and learning from them (e.g. James and Prout, 2003; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Gallagher, 2009b; Wyness, 2012) could help to achieve a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of rural Chinese

children's complex and dynamic friendships in the rural boarding school context (see Chapter 3).

When working with children to explore their understandings and experiences of friendships, ethical considerations must be fulfilled, not only to protect the children's rights but also to ensure a cooperative children-adult relationship, with strong rapport, thus enhancing the quality of the research (Hill, 2005). However, a discussion of ethical considerations in work with children is lacking in the existing Chinese literature. In 1989, the United Nations ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As a country that formally ratified the CRC, the Chinese Government started to incorporate the concept of children's rights into its local laws and practices in 1992. In the following decades, the spirit of the CRC has slowly but increasingly contributed to the emergence of new positions in conceptualizing children and childhood in China. In the academic field, an increasing number of scholars have begun to acknowledge children's central positions, rights and abilities, as well as the significance of ethical principles in child-related studies (e.g. Wang, 2002, 2003, 2007; Ma et al., 2006; Zheng, 2011, 2012a). So far, however, the ethics of working with children are still less developed in China (e.g. Zheng, 2011; Wang, 2011b). The majority of the literature lacks discussion of how the researchers deal with ethical issues when working with children in order to protect their rights and wellbeing during the research. Hence, how to apply ethical principles when working with children in a Chinese context was carefully considered in my work (see Chapter 3).

#### 2.4.2.2 Understanding children's friendships in Chinese social and cultural contexts

In addition to the aforementioned issues related to the complexity of friendships' meaning and patterns and diversity in practices of friendships, another gap this thesis seeks to fill is current Chinese literature's limited attention to contexts.

Inspired by Adams and Allan's (1998) suggestion, based on sociological theory, to place friendship in *the context*, it seems that the approaches employed in most existing literature to build connections between rural Chinese children's boarding school friendships and the surrounding contexts are limited. They focus excessively on building connections between these children's experiences of friendship and the degree of family support they receive (e.g. Lu and Ye, 2009; Dong, 2015; An, 2015). Few studies explore in great depth how China's particular social structure, cultural norms and political environment shape the friendships of its rural children at boarding schools. For example, based on ethnographic fieldwork at a rural boarding high school in China, Hansen (2015) provides insight into how individualization of students challenges and reinforces China's neo-socialist educational system. Although Hansen's work is not particularly focused on rural children's friendships at boarding school, it offers insightful discussions of these young people's talk and interactions with peers and teachers in their everyday school life. Of particular interest is the finding that student leaders learn to balance their responsibilities with the collective interest and their personal ties to friends (Shue, 2012; Hansen, 2012, 2015). Hansen highlights that some Chinese people's assumptions about the educational system, such as their views on the student leader system (e.g. Gao, 2012; Hansen, 2012, 2015) and their embedded social and cultural values, such as the relationship between self and collective (Wu, 1994), could significantly influence children's relationships with peers and teachers at school.

In fact, Chinese children's experiences in school settings are, to some extent, culturally and politically moralized (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2006; Yu, 2008; Bannister, 2013). In the Chinese education system, moral education (*deyu*) is conducted as part of a single compulsory curriculum from primary school to university (Li et al., 2004), the goal being to guide children and young people to assimilate the rules for dealing with everyday situations, including their everyday relationships in the family, school and society (Lin and Tsai,

1996). A number of scholars argue that moral education in China is politicized to encourage children's political socialization through education, and needs to be understood as "macro-moral education". This includes not only "micro-moral education" (morality), which is based on Chinese traditional social and cultural virtues, such as Confucianism, but also ideological education, political education, patriotic education, and citizenship education (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004; Yan, 2010; Yu, 2008). For instance, moral education in primary and secondary schools focuses on educating children to build a connection between 'social, interpersonal values (morality) and political values (ideology)' (Li et al., 2004:450). In discussing relationships with others, official policies, such as the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Central Committee and State Council's 'Some Opinions Concerning Further Strengthening and Improving the Ideological and Moral Construction of Minors' (*zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin weichengnianren sixiang daode jianshe de ruogan yijian*), issued by the State Council of China in 2004, conceptualize Chinese children as 'successors of the cause of Socialism with Chinese characteristics' (*zhongguo shehuizhuyi de jiebanren*). These policies highlight the importance of a socialist and collectivist spirit amongst children, encouraging them to be aware of and care about others and collective (*xinzhong you taren, xinzhong you jiti*) so as to achieve harmony (*hexie*) and solidarity (*tuanjie*).

In the existing literature, Confucian and collectivist values for dealing with relationships with others in moral education have been commonly picked out for their influence on Chinese children's relationships with peers and with teachers in school settings (e.g. Wu, 1994; Lin and Tsai, 1996; Wang and Mao, 1996; Hadley, 2003; Yu, 2008; Yan, 2010; Zhou et al., 2012; Hansen, 2015). For example, a number of scholars argue that the Confucian moral virtues of showing respect and obedience to teachers and parents are still actively taught to Chinese children (e.g. Wang and Mao, 1996; Zhou et al., 2012). Thus, although school children around the world very likely share a similar

experience of an unbalanced teacher-student power relationship, with their interactions with friends taking place under teachers' surveillance and intervention (Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Collins and Coleman, 2008; Harden, 2012; Davies, 2015; Vincent et al., 2018), the imbalance in power between teachers and students might exert a greater influence on Chinese children's friendships with peers. Therefore, it may be useful to combine an exploration of how significant adults' (e.g. teachers and parents) attitudes affect Chinese children's friendships with an examination of how these children actually practise friendship in their everyday social lives. On the one hand, this combination could uncover the ways and the extent to which these significant adults can influence Chinese children's friendships. However, as discussed previously, children do not simply passively accept all adult control, but instead tend to challenge it at some point to gain control over their lives (e.g. Corsaro, 1985; Corsaro and Eder, 1990; Renold, 2005; Harden, 2012). Therefore, on the other hand, the combination of ideas could develop a picture of how rural Chinese children actually respond to the interventions of these significant adults and the influences these adults have on their everyday friendships with peers, such as cross-gender friendships and childhood romance (Farrer, 2006; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015), at school.

In addition, in terms of the collectivist values concerning how one relates to others, many discussions have focused on one's responsibilities to the collective interest (e.g. Wu, 1994; Oyserman and Kimmelmeier, 2002; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Huang, 2016). However, although China has commonly been viewed as a country with collectivist values, some scholars have argued that China is experiencing rapid economic-social change, including a social process of individualization (e.g. Yan, 2010; Hansen, 2015; Wang, 2019). As a result, individual-oriented and collective-oriented values might coexist in modern China (e.g. Gummerum and Keller, 2008). These coexisting individual-oriented and collective-oriented values may shape Chinese people's everyday lives in matters such as relationships with others. For example, through



ethnographic fieldwork in a Chinese rural boarding school, Hansen (2015) pointed to conflicts between hierarchy and democracy in student-teacher relationships. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how children experience these coexisting values in their peer friendships in the school setting, which is constructed as a collective community that highlights the importance of collective interests and group-orientation (Hansen, 2015). This thesis will provide an empirical case to contribute to closing this gap.

Hence, in this thesis, when placing children's friendships in contexts that help to understand them, *the context* will be set up with multilevel elements (Adams and Allan, 1998), including such features as the individual's gender identity, boarding school's particular organizational structure, and Chinese social and cultural values (e.g., Confucian and collectivist values).

## **2.5 Conclusion: the direction of this Ph.D. study**

This Ph.D. study narrows down its research focus to rural Chinese children's understandings and experiences of friendships with peers in the rural primary boarding school setting. This decision is a result of respecting research interests gained from personal experience (see Chapter 1), and of considering China's current policy-oriented and academic needs, as well as being inspired by rich Western-based theories presented in friendship and childhood studies.

As discussed in the section justifying the importance of studying children's friendships in the school setting, middle childhood (between around 7 and 12 years old) is a significantly important period for children's friendships (e.g., Corsaro, 2015). Considering China's schooling age (beginning at age 6) (e.g., O'Neill, 2018), primary schools are a suitable setting in which to gain access to children's middle childhood lives. Because of the consequences of the school merging policy, in the rural area of China a large number of children attend boarding schools. Further, considering the widespread concern (and even resultant stigma) about the negative consequences of being away from

family support (e.g., Ren, 2008), increasing knowledge of the children's everyday friendships with peers in the boarding school setting can help us to know them better. This improved knowledge can help us to understand these children's needs in order to adjust social support (such as the SEL Project jointly run by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and UNICEF) and to show understanding of these children's relationships with others, raising the possibility of contributing to stigma reduction.

To fulfil this particular interest in exploring how children understand and practise friendships, a sociological perspective stands out. Learning from the positions and approaches to friendship research in general and to childhood research in particular taken by different disciplines, and focusing mainly on psychology and sociology, this chapter particularly appreciates that a sociological perspective seems more helpful, in terms of gaining access to children's complex, dynamic and contextualized understandings and practices of friendships (Adams and Allan, 1998). Together with the methodological call for ethnography in both friendship studies and the "new" paradigm of sociology of childhood (e.g., James and Prout, 2003), such a sociological perspective can offer a chance to work with children so as to directly learn their friendships from them.

Thus, this Ph.D. study aims in particular to add to the existing Chinese literature in two ways. Firstly, it examines the complexity and diversity of friendship, including its varied definitions and patterns. For example, as a result of being inspired by discussions about the highlighting of friendships' instrumental aspect amongst Chinese boys (Chen et al., 2004), I am interested in how these rural Chinese children distinguish between the intimate and instrumental patterns of friendships in talk and in practice. Secondly, the thesis emphasizes the importance of *the context* in friendship studies (Adams and Allan, 1998). This chapter discusses why the school setting matters to this topic, by unpacking how the school setting can offer multileveled elements to support our understandings of the complexity and diversity of children's

friendships from the individual level to the societal level. Thus, when studying children's friendships with peers at school, surrounding elements need to be considered throughout the research process.

As noted by Adams and Allan (1998), what should be included as *the context* in friendship studies is an open question about individual researcher's intension, perspective and vision of analysis. This thesis especially focuses on showing how "gender", "power relationships" and the "embedded Chinese social and cultural norms" impact on rural Chinese children's friendships with peers in the boarding school setting. As children's friendships is a less-developed topic in China, I was inspired by both Western-based literature about children's peer relationships (e.g., Thorne, 1993; Adler and Adler, 1998; George and Browne, 2000; Mellor, 2006; Davies, 2015; Vincent et al., 2018) and studies about Chinese schooling contexts (e.g., Bakken, 2000; Hansen, 2012, 2015; Schoenhals, 2016). These fruitful research outputs in turn encouraged me to embark on this Ph.D. project.

Since what children "say" about friendships and how children "do" friendships at school are both valued when gathering data to fill the above-mentioned gaps, an ethnographic approach can help. The following chapter will continue the discussion of how I learned from existing studies to design, conduct and adjust this Ph.D. study via ethnographic approaches in the context of China.

# Chapter 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

In the body of this chapter, the methodological approaches employed in this Ph.D. project are presented in five sections. It starts with a description of the research aims and questions. The second section begins by discussing why ethnography was the most appropriate approach to use in answering my research questions. Then, it shifts its focus to clarify my choices of research setting, sampling and data collection methods. The third section reviews ethical practices in the field. In the fourth section, ethnographic data analysis in the post-field is discussed. Lastly, this chapter turns to a reflexive account of how ‘the location of self’ (Hertz, 1996:5) imposed on the research process shaped my research.

## 3.2 Aim and research questions

As was summarized in the conclusion section of Chapter 2, the aim of the research is to explore the complexity and diversity of Chinese children’s understandings and practices of peer friendships in the context of a rural primary boarding school. The following specific research questions were set to support my exploration:

**Question 1:** What are the different types of friendships between children and their peers in a school setting? How do children understand and practise different types of friendships with peers at school?

**Question 2:** How does gender influence children’s friendships with peers in a school setting?

**Question 3:** How do the power relations between children and significant adults (teachers and parents) and the power

structures amongst children influence children's experiences of friendships with peers?

**Question 4:** How do Chinese sociocultural values shape children's understandings of friendships with peers and their daily acts of doing friendships in a school setting?

It should be noted that the above aim and research questions evolved from my initial research proposal<sup>4</sup>. The initial proposal was focused on exploring how children of migrant parent(s) understand and experience friendships with peers in the context of a rural primary boarding school in China. However, after piloting and reflecting on this, I recognized that stories about friendships of rural children of migrant parent(s) are just one part of the big picture of rural Chinese children's friendships with peers. It seemed that developing a good understanding of the "big picture" would be essential preparatory work in seeking to find a context within which to locate my initial research focus on friendships among children of migrant parent(s). Therefore, I decided to update this project's research aim and questions so as to focus not merely on children of migrant parent(s) but also to explore the broader vision of rural Chinese children's friendships with peers.

### **3.3 Designing and conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a primary boarding school in rural China**

#### **3.3.1 Why ethnography is the most appropriate approach with which to answer my research questions?**

In this project, the most crucial requirement when choosing research strategies was to ensure opportunities for engaging in abundant interactions with rural Chinese children at boarding school. This particular focus on interactions between children, and between children and myself, in the context of school

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<sup>4</sup> The initial focus has a certain influence on my choice of research settings (see 3.3.2) and practice of ethics (see section 3.4, 3.6 and Appendices).

derived not only from my research interest in exploring how children “do” contextualized friendships with peers in their daily interactions but also from my position of social constructionism. In this project, I mainly adopted sociological conceptualizations of children and childhood within the “new” paradigm of the sociology of childhood, and situated my focus within the theoretical framework which views ‘childhood as a social construction’ (James and Prout, 2003:8). In line with this position, this project was influenced by social constructionism. Social constructionism stresses that the categories and concepts employed by human beings to help them understand the world are social products, which are historically and culturally constructed with specific meanings (Gergen, 1985; Burr, 2003; Bryman, 2012). In social constructionism, reality is not considered to be singular and universal, but multiple and complex, and to be uniquely constructed by individuals in their day-to-day experiences (Kim, 2001; Young and Collin, 2004; Greener, 2011). Therefore, I aligned myself with Burr’s (2003) view that people’s versions of knowledge are constructed through their daily interpersonal interactions in their respective contexts.

In line with these considerations, a qualitative research strategy was deemed the most appropriate approach to learning about rural Chinese children’s versions of friendships with peers, constructed through daily interactions with each other at boarding school. Leavy (2017) states that qualitative researchers can examine ‘how people engage in processes of constructing and reconstructing meanings through daily interactions’ (p.129). Amongst various qualitative research methods, ethnography is the most appropriate one for this project.

Greene and Hogan (2005) argue that researching children’s experience demands methods that ‘can capture the nature of children’s lives as lived rather than taking children out of their everyday lives into a professional’s office or lab’ (p.3-4). Ethnography is one such method. Hammersley and Atkinson

(1995) define the ethnographic research process in practice as a particular method (or set of methods) which usually involves:

...the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (p.1)

In my project, ethnography, as a method that offers researchers a chance to immerse themselves in researched people's everyday lives, is helpful both in studies of friendships and in examining children's lives. To be specific, as discussed in Chapter 2, sociologists advise researchers to be sensitive when exploring the complexity and diversity of friendships as defined and practised by different research participants in different situations (e.g., Allan, 1979, 1996; Allan and Adams, 2007; Nayak, 2013; Ryle, 2015). Ethnography, by allowing me to observe and participate in continuous and intensive communications and interactions between/with research participants, helped me to develop the sensitivity needed to explore the complexity and diversity of these children's friendships. In research exploring questions about children's feelings, thoughts and experiences, ethnography is highly recommended as a method that acknowledges children as a primary source of knowledge (e.g. James and Prout, 2003; Clark and Statham, 2005; Qvortrup et al., 2009). In ontological terms, an ethnographic approach to childhood studies views children as having distinctive cultures and respects them as beings, as natives of their cultures, and as experts in their own lives, while adult researchers are outsiders (Gallagher, 2009b:72). From the epistemology standpoint, an ethnographic approach to childhood studies involves viewing the interpretative knowledge of childhood as not being 'out there' waiting to be collected, but as needing to be constructed by interacting with children (Gallagher, 2009b:72). Therefore, I adopted ethnography as a strategy that could provide me, an adult researcher working 'with' children rather than 'on' them (Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 2012),

with a view of children's competence at interpreting their cultures and lives in their social world (James, 2001).

In addition, ethnography's product – that is, 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of researched people's everyday lives – is useful for providing in-depth, detailed and immersive answers (Greener, 2011; Bryman, 2012) to questions about what these rural Chinese children's friendships look like with peers at boarding school. In this project, the advantage of capturing participants' contextualized thoughts, emotions and a web of complex relationships among them offered by 'thick description' (Ponterotto, 2006:542) was valued above all. By capturing children's talk about what friendship is and who friends are, as well as their various emotions, behaviours, and language in interactions with different friends, I can present the complexity and diversity of children's friendships with peers.

In short, considering ethnography's particular advantages, as described above, in studying children's friendships, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study with children in a primary boarding school in rural China to collect data with which to answer my research questions. The following subsection goes on to justify how I chose and gained permission to place this study in Central Primary School, a rural primary boarding school located in Grassland Township<sup>5</sup> in the western area of Hubei Province.

### **3.3.2 Choosing and accessing a research setting in the context of China**

Choosing a research fieldwork site in ethnography requires a trade-off between breadth and depth of investigation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:40). Therefore, it is not unusual for researchers to conduct ethnography in one site with a small sample group (Greener, 2011:74). In this project, considering the challenges posed by the reduced time available for the research (as discussed in the following subsection), which resulted from the

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<sup>5</sup> Both "Central Primary School" and "Grassland Township" are pseudonyms.



policies of the project's funder, depth of investigation was the priority when choosing the fieldwork site. Thus, I decided to conduct the fieldwork in only one site. To effectively serve this project's aim of exploring Chinese children's understandings and experiences of friendships with peers at a rural primary boarding school in China, such schools were the targeted research setting. In the end, my fieldwork was conducted in a rural primary boarding school I am calling Central Primary School in Grassland Township in the western area of Hubei Province.

The decision to locate this study in Hubei Province was shaped by my initial research proposal. As explained in the previous section of this chapter, in my initial research plan, children of migrant parents were the subject of my particular focus. Thus, when I chose a research setting, the situation of children of migrant parent(s) was one key issue shaping my decision. It was influenced by my personal experiences and by literature (e.g., Hashim, 2006; Ruan, 2008; UNICEF, 2008; Yang, 2012) which suggested that the proportion of children of migrant parent(s) within the local population is likely to shape local communities' migration culture, and to impact on children's lives after parental migration. Thus, Hubei Province was chosen because, according to data from China's national censuses (ACWF, 2013), its proportion of children of migrant parent(s) in rural areas was at China's average level, meaning that these children are neither the dominant group nor an extreme minority. After updating my focus from rural children of migrant parents to rural children "in general", I still kept my research located in Hubei Province in order to seek a good mix of child participants with different family backgrounds.

The use of three main practical criteria resulted in the selection of Central Primary School as the fieldwork site. The first criterion was that the dialect (*fangyan*) used by locals in the fieldwork site needed to be understandable and ideally similar to my own dialect. In China, while Mandarin (*putonghua*) is the national spoken language, people in different areas speak different dialects. Since Chinese dialects are 'not mutually intelligible', people from different

areas of China can find each other's dialects 'incomprehensible' (Ramsey, 1989:6). According to other scholars' reports (see Johnston, 2017) and my previous experiences at rural Chinese schools (see Chapter 1), children and teachers normally spoke Mandarin in class but dialects outside of class. Therefore, for the purpose of an ethnographic study highlighting children themselves as the primary source of knowledge (e.g. James and Prout, 2003; Clark and Statham, 2005; Qvortrup et al., 2009) of their friendships with peers, in the process encouraging them to speak about their friendships in 'their own words as far as was practicably possible' (Greener, 2011:74), my linguistic competence was crucial.

Although Corsaro (1981) claims that playing the role of 'learner' to learn the local language from children can contribute to establishing an equal power relationship between adult researcher and child participants, the time-consuming work of learning a new dialect was not feasible in this project's fieldwork because of the relatively short fieldwork time allowed by my funder's policy. For this reason, I decided to conduct my research at a site where locals spoke a similar dialect to mine, to ensure an effective data collection process based on smooth communication with children from the outset of the fieldwork. I believed that such a language advantage could foster effective communication and interaction with children so as to enhance the rapport between us and increase their willingness to talk with/in front of me. Further, it could help me to record exactly what these children said about "friends" and "friendship", as well as the content of talk between them and their friends or non-friends. Otherwise, as discussed by Thøgersen (2006) after conducting a study in China, a fieldworker's limited linguistic competence could undermine the quality of communication, the process of exploring discourse and the resultant construction of Chinese social reality.

Moreover, as Greener (2011) underlines, one goal that ethnographers want to achieve is to 'capture behaviours in the research site in a naturalistic way' (p.75). Users of such observational methods hope that, after a period of

adjustment, the researcher's presence is no longer significant. However, according to the literature and my previous experiences at rural Chinese schools (see Chapter 1), dialect is 'a marker separating insiders from outsiders' (Sæther, 2006:45) if the locals use their dialect to communicate with each other but only speak Mandarin with me. Therefore, speaking a similar dialect can prevent me from repeatedly rekindling the awareness of my status as an outsider. In this case, I focused especially on the Western area of Hubei Province, where I grew up and can speak the dialect at a native level.

The second criterion for choosing a fieldwork site was the possibility of gaining official permission to enter and stay in a school, as schools are strictly managed organizations in China's tightly controlled and politicized education system (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004). As a school-based project, my research required permission from the local authorities, such as the local government and education authority, in order to gain access to a school. At first I tried to gain permission through a "public" route: calling or messaging potential educational authorities to introduce my research plans as a Ph.D. student studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh. Unfortunately, my requests were swiftly rejected. One reason might have been the "sensitivity" of my research. As noted in the previous section, when I contacted potential research settings in autumn 2015, children of migrant parent(s) were highlighted as the targeted participants. At that time, children of migrant parent(s) were a nationally sensitive group in China in the wake of media reports appearing in June of that year of child suicide following parental migration in Bijie, Guizhou Province. In addition, I suspected that the way I identified myself (a Ph.D. student studying abroad at the University of Edinburgh) when seeking permission to access the research setting was not familiar to rural communities in China, and thus failed to show why I was worthy of the local authority's trust (Thøgersen, 2006).

I then decided to try a "private" route. To gain access to closed settings, such as a school in my case, Bryman (2012:435) suggests that it is common to do

so through persons such as friends and colleagues, and the support of someone within the organization. When using this “private” way of gaining research permission, I was aware that it was of great importance to have the support of a well-known and “powerful” person or organization as an inside contact (Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006), given the embedded values of respecting and obeying authorities (Wang and Mao, 1996; Yu, 2008). Thanks to an official with whom I had worked during one of my undergraduate programmes in Hubei Province, I gained support from the Welfare Rights Department of a Hubei Province District’s Communist Youth League of China where she was working. With support from this relatively high-level governmental authority, I successfully obtained some local authorities’ trust and was offered three research setting options in the western area of Hubei Province.

Of the three options, I found Central Primary School in Grassland Township to be the most appropriate for the study. This school stood out mainly because of the inside contact’s advanced political and professional abilities for supporting my access, as well as the school authority’s sympathy with my “ground rules” governing my role in the school and the ethical considerations surrounding the project. Ms Aiping<sup>6</sup>, the inside contact, was not only one of the top political leaders of the Grassland Township but also a key official of the local support services for women and children, especially children of migrant parent(s), with rich experience of working with children, families and schools. Therefore, she was not only the “powerful” insider supporting my access (Heimer and Thøgersen, 2006) to a tightly controlled and politicized educational setting (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004) but also the one who could provide in-field suggestions for dealing with difficulties (Sæther, 2006) in working with children and the school during the fieldwork.

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<sup>6</sup> “Ms Aiping” is a pseudonym.

Moreover, in comparison to other options, Central Primary School's educational authority showed generous sympathy with my request not to be involved in any teaching and supervision tasks. As Bryman emphasizes (2012:435), researchers need to offer something in return to create a sense that they are trustworthy. Indeed, because of my overseas educational background in the UK, I was often asked to teach English by the school authorities<sup>7</sup>. While I was willing to offer something in return (see section 3.6), whatever I offered in return should not invite restrictions on my data collection plans or on my relationships with the children. Being a part-time teacher was time-consuming work (preparation, teaching and assessment) which would further reduce my already limited ethnographic research time and negatively influence the quality and the quantity of collected data. Moreover, from the perspective of ethical considerations (see section 3.4), I strove to ensure that the children were fully aware that I was not a teacher and my research was not a piece of schoolwork when working with them (Gallagher, 2009a). Being involved in teaching and supervision tasks incurs a serious ethical risk of taking advantage of the Chinese Confucian-collectivist value of obedience to teachers (see Chapter 7), thus undermining the children's autonomy when they are deciding whether or not to participate in the project.

In addition, Central Primary School offered me considerable freedom to conduct ethnographic research on its campus. It generously offered me on-campus accommodation and access to meals with the children in the canteen to ensure I had a more immersive experience in the same context, with the same timetable and routines, as the children from morning to night. Having taken account of all the above considerations (language, accessibility, in-field support, and agreements on "ground rules", and "freedom" in the site), I

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<sup>7</sup> Johnston (2017) reports a similar requirement by the school. English teaching and 'global vision' are highly valued in the current Chinese quality education system. Therefore, having a well-educated visiting 'teacher' from an outstanding university abroad can be used as evidence of rural schools' effort to improve educational quality and commitment to promoting quality education (Johnston, 2017:80).

decided to conduct this ethnographic project in Central Primary School, a rural primary boarding school located in the main street of Grassland Township in the western area of Hubei Province.

### **3.3.3 Sampling within the setting and the process of data collection**

In my initial research proposal, I intended to conduct a year-long ethnographic fieldwork study with the children of Central Primary School. However, when I contacted the staff of the Education Section of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom, who were required by the China Scholarship Council to supervise the students receiving funding, I was told that the funder's policy did not support year-long fieldwork back in China. As a result, after continuous negotiation, the maximum research time I was able to gain was five months. Thus, my ethnographic fieldwork period was conducted from February to July 2016 – a period of about five months.

In my response to the issues resulting from this shorter time allocation, as discussed in the following subsection (3.3.3.2), I was inspired by Knoblauch's (2005) views on 'focused ethnography', Pink and Morgan's (2013) discussions of short-term ethnography, and Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) argument about the trade-off between breadth and depth of investigation in choosing settings and sampling within the setting. Ultimately, I decided to reshape my sampling within the setting and the data collection process to ensure the intensity and quality of my relatively condensed ethnographic fieldwork.

#### **3.3.3.1 Sampling within the setting**

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) claim that sampling within the research setting refers to decisions about 'where to observe and when, who to talk to and what to ask, as well as about what to record and how' (p.45). To guide the practice of sampling within the ethnographic setting, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out that time, people and context are three major dimensions that researchers need to consider. Over time, people's 'attitudes

and activities often vary' (p.46); variations in context require different kinds of behaviours from people (p.51) (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). When sampling within the school setting, I noticed that the time and context in this setting operated in tandem, via school timetables, to shape the children's interactions: following school timetables, children are organized into different activities in different contexts and are required to behave differently.

In ethnographic studies located in rural boarding schools in China, both Hansen (2015) and Johnston (2017) observed that, as tightly managed educational institutions, boarding schools in rural China always have busy schedules and children spend most of their time at school. Central Primary School also has a busy schedule for schooldays. Over eighty percent of the boarding students at Central Primary School were residential students who spent all their time at school from Sunday night to Friday lunchtime<sup>8</sup>, and followed the school's tightly structured daily schedule<sup>9</sup>. The school's timetable divided children's school time into different activities and constructed different contexts for these activities in different time periods. As discussed in Chapter 2, some empirical studies of friendships point out that people understand "friend" in different ways and engage in different patterns of friendships in different contexts (Wolf, 1966, 2001; Allan, 1979, 1996; Badhwar, 1993; Allan and Adams, 2007). To answer my research question exploring whether or not children construct and practise different patterns of friendships at school, this project placed great importance on engaging the children in talking about friendship in general and through different interactions in different contexts during different periods of the school day. For example, considering the nature of school as a place of discipline (see Chapter 2), I needed to collect data on how these children talk about and do friendships both when they are under

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<sup>8</sup> On Friday afternoons, all children were picked up from school by their guardians (parents or other relatives, such as grandparents, who took care of children of migrant parents). On Sunday afternoons, residential students were brought back to school by their guardians. Evening self-study time was compulsory for residential students but optional for daytime students.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix II for Central Primary School's summer timetable.

their teachers' close supervision (e.g. in class time in classrooms) and in contexts during less regulated times (e.g. in free play time in playgrounds and in girls' dormitory rooms<sup>10</sup>). Thus, during my five-month ethnographic period, in order to maximize the opportunities to observe and interact with the children, I stayed at Central Primary School and participated as far as possible in the children's daily routines, covering the entire range of activities and contexts in which the children participate in the school setting.

Therefore, to be sufficiently immersive in these children's everyday school lives, I needed a strong rapport with children, not only to ensure that they felt comfortable in my presence but also to enable me to "touch" their personal thoughts, experiences and memories about friendships. These, to some extent, can be sensitive (see section 3.4) and emotionally charged (Greco et al., 2015) due to the negative side of friendships (see Chapter 2). In this case, considering my limited ethnographic fieldwork time allocation, I decided to prioritize depth and quality of investigation over breadth in the sampling process. I focused on a small number of children to ensure that I could spend enough time with each of them to get know them, to build up good rapport with them, and to have abundant opportunities to observe them and to let them express themselves.

As discussed previously, I needed to be able to easily follow my research participants' school lives at different times and in different contexts<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, I preferred my participants to be in the same classroom(s). Because of the school merging policy (see Chapter 2), Central Primary School serves over 300 pupils from nine surrounding villages belonging to Grassland Township. The school has classes from Primary Year 1 to Year 6. Primary Years 3 and 4 each have one class of around 40 students, while all other primary years have two classes of around 20 students each. I finally decided

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<sup>10</sup> See section 3.6 for my restrictions on collecting data from boys' dormitory rooms.

<sup>11</sup> While following the school's timetable, each classroom has its own scheduled plan for courses and contents of activities.



to work with children from two classes of Primary Year 5 (P5). This decision was taken for two main reasons.

Firstly, as mentioned, friendships with peers experienced by rural children of migrant parents was the specific focus of my initial research proposal, and P5 (1) and P5 (2) represented more diversity than other classes in the distribution of children with two migrant parents, with a migrant mother, with a migrant father, and without migrant parents. Although my research focus was updated during the fieldwork period, my updated focus on the “big picture” of rural Chinese children’s friendships with peers in a boarding school setting could still be explored by working with these P5 children. They had been randomly allocated to the two classes, and consequently presented great diversity in their personal characteristics (e.g. gender, family background, school performance, and temperament). I believed that this sample could provide me with a wide range of perspectives from which to explore and interpret the complexity of friendships experienced by different children. Moreover, rapport establishment needs time. Considering the limited fieldwork time, to continue working with the children with whom rapport had been established was an effective choice in my case.

Secondly, when deciding which classes to work with for this project, each class teacher’s attitude towards my research and ethical principles was carefully consulted. In Chinese school settings, the class teacher (*ban zhuren*) is in charge of the classroom and responsible for all the children’s affairs within it, such as their educational progress, their emotional wellbeing, and discipline in the classroom (see also Schoenhals, 2016). Thus, although Ms Aiping, my inside contact in Grassland Township (see section 3.3.2), was my gatekeeper who enabled me to access Central Primary School, the class teachers were the most important and experienced gatekeepers in the school, as I needed to work with them to gain access and support when working with the children from their classrooms. Compared to other class teachers, P5’s two class teachers showed more understanding, agreement and enthusiasm regarding

my research when I consulted them. Therefore, working with children from P5's two classes could not only contribute to answering my research questions, but also ensure strong support from experienced class teachers when dealing with any difficulties that might arise in my daily fieldwork.

Thus, in this project, having gained permission from children as well as their guardians (see section 3.4), I worked with 49 child participants from P5 – 26 pupils from P5 (1) and 23 pupils from P5 (2). Amongst them there were: 25 boys and 24 girls; 44 resident students and 5 day students; 13 children living in Grassland Township and 36 children living in surrounding villages; 7 children having two migrant parents, 15 children having a migrant father, 4 children having a migrant mother, and 23 children having both parents at home. At the time of my fieldwork, 42 children were aged 11, 5 were aged 12, and 2 were aged 13. Although I viewed the lack of age diversity as a limitation of my sample at that stage, cross-age friendships in Central Primary School's age-mixed dormitory rooms, as described and practised by children in interviews and observations respectively during the later fieldwork period (see Chapter 6), compensated for this shortcoming to some extent by providing some information about cross-age friendships.

As well as these children as “core” participants, I also closely engaged with these children's teachers at school and took opportunities to speak with the children's guardians (e.g., parents and grandparents) in the field because they were the significant others in these children's lives (Davies, 2015). In total, I had daily interactions with seven teachers in the P5 and 6 shared office and occasionally engaged with other teachers, such as wardens, the teacher who provided children with mental and emotional support, and the school's managerial team. Although the sex ratio amongst these teachers was almost balanced, I talked more with female teachers because the majority of teachers in the P5 & 6 shared office were female. As in other rural Chinese school settings (Wang, 2013), the majority of teachers in Central Primary School were middle aged (e.g., 40s and 50s). Only two teachers were in their 20s and three

in their 30s. Also, although all these teachers were qualified, few of them attended higher education (see also Wang, 2013). For the majority (especially those in their 50s), the highest educational background was “vocational senior secondary school” (*zhongzhuan*). Only one of them was a university graduate, while a few of them obtained degrees from “teachers’ colleges” (*shifan xueyuan*). In addition, almost all these teachers complained that they often felt financial pressure because of their low salaries (see also Wang, 2013). Therefore, many of these teachers spent their after-work time engaging in some other jobs for extra income (e.g., farming and online sales business).

Apart from teachers, I also spoke with all my child participants’ guardians. Most of the conversations happened when they came to school to pick up or to drop off their children. I had more frequent conversations with guardians living in Grassland Township as I met them in places outside school (e.g., streets, supermarkets, and bus stations). Children’s parents were always in their 30s and 40s, and the majority of grandparents were in their late 50s and early 60s. Since many child participants’ fathers were either away from home (e.g., migrant workers) or busy at work (e.g., farmers, factory workers, drivers, sale staffs), more mothers and grandparents (especially grandmothers) than fathers took care of children’s education. Therefore, in comparison to ethnographic conversations with fathers, I had more conversations with children’s guardians with children’s mothers/grandparents (especially grandmothers).

The abundant informal conversations with these significant adults offered me rich data with which to explore in greater depth how these adults’ opinions of children’s friendships shaped the children’s knowledge and behaviours in friendship, perhaps by teaching children certain sociocultural norms (see Chapter 5 and 7). In this respect, I also viewed them as important research participants. Thus, in the findings chapters, permission was gained for the use of all data provided by these significant adults as well as that provided by child participants.

### 3.3.3.2 Data collection strategies

The process of data collection in ethnographic research embraces a range of methods, including participant observation and informal conversations with locals as the main sources of data, as well as other sources such as interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Greener, 2011). In this project, I employed participant observation and ethnographic conversations as the main methods, supplemented with formal interviews (35 children having 30- to 40-minute individual/paired semi-structured interviews), a participatory method called the “diary programme” (in which 36 children participated), and collection of texts and documents (e.g., school decorations/displays, textbooks, and children's school work).

By comparing studies on children's experiences of gender differences conducted by Thorne (1993) using observation-based methods, and research by Cairns and colleagues (1995) using children's self-expressed methods, Chen and colleagues (2003) argue that different data collection methods can deeply influence researchers' findings. Therefore, I chose to combine methods. This was decided upon, firstly, to avoid narrow understandings of children's friendships, which could arise from over-reliance on only one data collection method (Punch, 2002a:345). For example, in Reynolds's (1991) study, combined observation and talk-based methods made it possible to gain deeper understandings of children's wordings (e.g., whether or not the tasks referred to as ‘work’ by the children were true work or just the tasks they disliked). Secondly, I believed that a combination of methods could enhance the rigour of collected data through triangulation and cross-checking. For instance, children, like adults, might lie to researchers for various reasons (e.g., avoiding painful ‘truth’; pleasing the researcher; managing impressions) (Punch, 2002a:325). Thus, comparing data collected by different methods might help me to identify contradictory information. Indeed, in my project, through combining “what children say about friend(ship)s” in talk-based sessions and “how children *do* friendships” in observations, I noticed some meaningful

information (as when “friends” nominated in interviews and “friends” involved in everyday interactions did not match).

Moreover, as a strategy for responding to the short time allocated to this fieldwork, this combination of methods offered me wider data collection perspectives which would increase the intensity of ethnographic data (Knoblauch, 2005; Pink and Morgan, 2013). In response to the argument that short-term ethnographies may be ‘superficial’, Knoblauch (2005) uses ‘focused ethnography’ to redefine short-term ethnography by highlighting the intensity of the data collected during a short period of fieldwork. To ensure the intensity of data collected in ethnographic studies with shorter time-scales, Knoblauch (2005) and Pink and Morgan (2013) provide some suggestions for data collection, of which three significantly inspired my fieldwork:

1. In comparison to the practice of “hanging around”, waiting for things to happen, ethnographers in short-term fieldwork need to actively seek opportunities to immerse themselves in the activities participants experience every day, and so to increase the depth and intensity of the research encounters.
2. Building up an ongoing and intensive ethnographic-theoretical dialogue during the entire fieldwork period provides a sharp focus as data collection and analysis intertwine to contribute a firm response to the research questions in short-term ethnography. Thus, by bringing theoretical questions into empirical fieldwork, ethnographers can reshape the decisions about what questions to ask, what activities to follow, and where to position themselves during the next day’s fieldwork.
3. During short fieldwork, ethnographers could employ different technological devices, such as tape recorders, videos and photo-cameras, to intensively record as much material as possible relating to the research questions.

(Summarized from Knoblauch (2005) and Pink and Morgan (2013))

Inspired by these three suggestions, I shaped my data collection process as discussed below to make sure of gathering intensive data in my limited ethnographic fieldwork.

### *Participant observation*

Participant observation was a central part of data collection in this project. I engaged with these P5 children's everyday school lives in the capacity of participant-as-observer (Gold, 1957). This role offered me both the "external" view of an observer and the "internal" view of a participant (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:109-110). Thus I could corroborate the interpretations derived from what was observed and from my background knowledge with what the children actually said when chatting and playing. Although knowledge of children's practices of friendship in school settings gained from literature suggested a selective approach to observation (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Corsaro, 2003), I followed their school routines as completely as I could, observing, chatting and playing with them in different spaces, to systematically collect data covering a full range of their school experiences from morning to night, rather than just selecting the superficially 'interesting' events (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:49).

Before introducing the path that I followed when conducting the participant observations, I will present a basic description of Central Primary School<sup>12</sup>. Central Primary School has a small campus. In the front central area of the campus there is a basketball court-sized playground. On the left and right sides of the playground, there are two three-storey buildings, one of which is for student accommodation and the other for teachers' accommodation. Behind the front playground is a four-storey building, called the "main building", in which are located all the classrooms and teachers' offices (from the ground

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<sup>12</sup> Central Primary School represents a "common" form of construction, comparable with other rural primary boarding schools I visited in China. Therefore, such a description is unlikely to pose a risk of identifying this school.

floor to second floor). Behind the main building, on the left, is a two-storey canteen next to a football pitch-sized playground. My daily observations were conducted in the classrooms of P5 (1) and P5 (2) on the second floor of the main building, in the second floor hallways floor, in the front playground (the back playground being under construction and out of use during my fieldwork period), sometimes in the canteen and in the girls' dormitory rooms.

Daily classroom observations included both class time observations and break time observations. Since the children had very few free interactions with their peers in class time, I conducted most of the daily classroom observations during break time. Occasionally, however, I also carried out classroom observation in class time to familiarize myself with the students' school curriculum. In addition, I recorded their performances and collected friendship-related information mentioned in their textbooks, by their teachers, and in their group discussions (e.g., teachers' talk about "good" friends presented in Chapter 7). During class time, so as not to disturb the class, I took my place at a desk at the back of the classroom. In break time, the large free spaces at the back of the classrooms and in hallways outside the classrooms were the contexts which provided the greatest focus for my observations of the children's chat and play. Sometimes I also wandered around the classrooms and hallways to observe or join in the children's games and to chat with them at their sites.

Besides classrooms and hallways, playgrounds were used as everyday contexts for participant observation. In the P5 children's timetables, the specific time periods for participant observation of their playground interactions were during daily morning cleaning time (P5's cleaning duty area was the playground<sup>13</sup>), daily morning and afternoon gymnastics exercise time, daily dinner break time, and club times on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. To

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<sup>13</sup> In Central Primary School, each class took on responsibilities for cleaning chores in own classroom and in a specific area of the school campus (e.g., playgrounds, toilets, hallways).

observe the children's interactions, I either stayed in a certain area to observe the nearby children or joined at random in the children's games and chats, sometimes of my own accord and sometimes when invited to do so by the children.

On occasion (but not often) I also conducted observations inside (and outside) the canteen and the girls' dormitories. Although canteens and dormitory rooms could present very rich contexts for studying children's friendships in school settings (Thorne, 1993; Yang, 2012; Growing Home, 2015), I did not feel free to conduct participant observations in these two contexts in Central Primary School, as it may have led to violations of the school rules. For example, the children were not allowed to chat inside the canteen when they were eating. At the very beginning of my fieldwork, I did not know this rule and followed Thorne's (1993) idea of sitting down and eating with the children in the canteen. However, since the children got excited and could not stop talking to me when I was around, children at the table I was sitting at were reprimanded by teachers. This embarrassing experience reminded me to update my observation plan for the canteen area, so that thereafter I did most of the canteen observations in the canteen's outside waiting area. In this waiting area, although the children were still asked to remain quiet and orderly, the rule was not applied as strictly as it was inside the canteen. Similar conflicts arose when my participant observations in girls' dormitory rooms overstepped school rules. I will detail this experience of struggle in the later reflexivity section when reflecting on my multiple roles and multiple relationships during the fieldwork.

### *Interviews and the "diary programme"*

In this project, although the rich and diverse information gathered by different techniques can make data analysis challenging (Gallagher, 2009b), I supplemented participant observation with interviews and the "diary programme". These were approaches to encourage 'conversations' with children, to explore their own knowledge of their social lives (Mayall, 2008),



and to understand their language and ways of engaging in meaning-making (Maybin, 2006).

In some methodological literature, the use of interviews in ethnographic research seems to be contested. For example, some scholars suggest that the data collected in formally arranged interviews are not 'naturalistic' (Greener, 2011:76), in comparison with data collected in spontaneous and informal ethnographic conversations in normally occupied places (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:139). However, in my project, considering the required intensity of data in my fieldwork and the need for privacy in some conversations about the sensitive issues surrounding friendships, ethnographic interviews were viewed as a resource rather than a problem (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

Unlike the informal conversations led by the children about their interests and the things and people around them, interviews provided me with a chance to ask the questions I was interested in directly and intensively. In everyday informal conversations with children, I preferred to respect children's cultures of communication and provides them with a free space in which to discuss the issues that most concern and interest them (Christensen, 2004). Therefore, conversations were always led by children. Although these conversations offered me insights into children's worlds (e.g., books they read, movies they watched, and games they played), the topics I was interested in might not always be covered. In interviews, I focused on the topics of "friends" and "friendships". Children not only provided intensive data about how they defined and talked about different patterns of friendship, but also added significant data to the information collected via participant observation. For example, through interviews, researchers can gain information about past events to help them understand the present situation (Greener, 2011:77). In interviews, children always recalled how and why they had started friendships with each nominated friend, and provided detailed descriptions of their interactions with these friends, which happened at times and in spaces that I did not have access to (e.g., "secret play" at night in boys' dormitory rooms). These data significantly

assisted in answering my research question about children's experiences of friendships.

Gaining information about past events from interviews (Greener, 2011) meant depending on children's memories for part of my interview data. Some scholars have pointed out the need to be careful when using 'memories' as data (e.g., Thorne, 1993; Evans, 2007) because 'memories are partial, malleable, and shaped by later experiences as well as by conventions for remembering' (Thorne, 1993:7). However, in this project, as claimed by Evans (2007), the purpose of including these memories as data is 'not to construct a history of individual pasts and their relationship to dominant memories [...] but to make sense of how they fit their pasts into their present understandings of themselves' (p.9). Therefore, these stories of their past experiences undoubtedly helped me to understand why they highlighted certain characteristics of friends and aspects or functions of friendships in the present.

In addition, as resident students at Central Primary School, the children lacked private moments in their daily school lives because they shared all of the school spaces from morning to evening, and all their activities were conducted under the noses of the surrounding teachers and peers. Therefore, private interviews could offer children an opportunity to share opinions that might be considered inappropriate in public, such as views that might hurt people's feelings or give other people a bad impression of them (Greener, 2011:77). For example, in private interviews, some children disclosed and explained their own and other peers' actions when pretending to befriend someone "on the surface" (*biaomianshang*) for different purposes (see Chapter 6).

Hence, in this project, based on a well-established rapport with children, in the later part of the ethnographic fieldwork, I interviewed a total of 35 children at times convenient to them during their school days. Not all children were interviewed individually. There were 5 paired interviews since some children insisted on being interviewed with their best friends. Some of them viewed

“being interviewed together” as proof of their intimate friendships (see also Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018). In other cases, the request might have been made because of the issue of adult-child power in the interview (Wyness, 2012), since some children’s body language and facial expressions indicated that they felt uncomfortable about being interviewed alone. Therefore, as suggested by Hill (2006), working with peers could provide children with a friendly environment in which they would feel free to share their opinions with the adult researcher<sup>14</sup>.

Each of these interviews lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. They were semi-structured to focus on the interviewees’ personal understandings of certain research-related terms, such as “friend” and “friendship”, and their experiences of friendships with friends. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because, compared with structured or completely unstructured interviews, they can provide interviews with a good balance of control and flexibility (Fontana and Frey, 2008). Particularly when studying complex and sometimes sensitive issues, semi-structured interviews can both offer the researcher a certain control over the order and topics covered in the interview and provide the interviewees with the flexibility needed to clarify their answers (Barriball and While, 1994), while inspiring researchers with new ideas emerging from their stories (Fontana and Frey, 2008). In this project, semi-structured interviews gave me a chance to ask children intensively about some questions that arose and interested me after a certain time in the field (e.g., where the commonly used phrase “relying on girls” (*toukao nvsheng*) comes from<sup>15</sup>), while leaving enough flexibility to dig out any stories or comments that children thought were related to the topics of “friend” and “friendship” and that might inspire me. For

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<sup>14</sup> In Hill’s (2006) work, focus groups were also recommended as an important tool for responding to the power imbalance when conducting ‘conversations’ with children. However, I did not use this approach given the lack of privacy it afforded when addressing a potentially sensitive issue (Gallagher, 2009b), and the further risk of limiting some members’ abilities to express themselves freely because of the group’s hierarchy (France, 2000; Adler and Adler, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 6.

example, through eliciting additional children's talk about events taking place between themselves, their same-gender friends and the opposite-gender peers whom they liked or who liked them, I became informed as to *when* and *where* to observe such episodes (see Chapter 5).

Besides interviewing the children, I found opportunities to conduct individual semi-structured interviews with 7 adults (4 P5 teachers and 3 P5 children's guardians). These 4 P5 teachers included the class teachers of P5(1) and P5(2), who took on the greatest responsibility for looking after P5 children at school, as well as the P5 Chinese teacher and the teacher who provided children with mental and emotional support. These four teachers were chosen because I had noticed in observations that 'relationships with others' emerged as a frequent topic in their interactions with children. The 3 guardians were chosen randomly<sup>16</sup>, depending on their availability. These interviews with adults centred on their thoughts about children's friendships and other peer relationships at school. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the interviewee's degree of engagement. Although the number of interviewed adults was limited, these interviews were successful in providing intensive data to add to my abundant but informal ethnographic conversations with other teachers and children's guardians in the field. Through combining these precisely recorded interview data with other informal conversations, I gained rich and diverse data which allowed me to explore in greater depth how these significant adults' opinions of children's friendships shaped the children's knowledge and behaviour in friendships, in some cases by teaching children certain sociocultural norms/values (e.g., norms of dealing with relationships with opposite gender peers as discussed in Chapter 5 and collective-oriented norms/values as discussed in Chapter 7).

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<sup>16</sup> In the field, it was difficult for me to arrange interviews with children's guardians, especially with those who lived/worked in surrounding villages rather than in Grassland Township (see section 3.3.3.1). Therefore, the 3 chosen guardians all lived in Grassland Township.

In addition to the interviews, I incorporated a participatory data collection method called the “diary programme” as an alternative approach to communicating with me. As highlighted by some scholars, children, as relatively powerless social actors in a world dominated by adult discourse and surveillance, often feel stressed in face-to-face work with adults (Qvortrup, 1994; Brannen and O’Brien, 1995). In my project, the “diary programme” was designed to respond to the possibility of some children finding it stressful to express themselves in a face-to-face interview, but wishing to find a private space in which to share their thoughts with me, unheard by others. Since all 49 child participants asked to join the “diary programme” when I initially proposed the idea, I bought them each a notebook to use as the “diary book”, in which they could record their thoughts and experiences of friendships as well as their questions about me or about this project that they wanted to share with me privately. They were invited to hand their notebooks to me whenever they wished, whereupon I read them and replied by writing back in their notebooks. Since these children could write in or read the notebooks at any time and in any context that made them feel safe and comfortable, I believe this “diary programme” successfully provided them with a relaxing, independent and private<sup>17</sup> environment in which to communicate with me.

In the end, 36 children joined this “diary programme” to a greater or lesser extent (13 children took “diary books” but never handed them back to me). These 36 children, fortunately, included the 14 who did not participate in the interviews. When recruiting participants both for interviews and for the “diary programme”, I did not select respondents (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 221), but offered equal opportunities to all the P5 children. Therefore, in the ideal situation, all 49 children would participate in interviews and the diary programme. However, in keeping with the ethical agreements (see section 3.4), I respected children’s rights of dissent and withdrawal (Graham et al., 2013).

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<sup>17</sup> See section 3.4 for the strategy of preserving confidentiality created by children and followed by me in the “diary programme”.

Although not everyone joined in the two supportive data collection methods used in this project, the ‘thick’ data offered by participating children have already significantly contributed interpretations of the meaning of the research findings (Ponterotto, 2006).

Moreover, through reflecting on children’s withdrawal from these two methods, I was aware that this should not be viewed merely as a negative experience of “losing data”. In fact, it can contribute to researchers’ reflections on the choice and application of methods in working with children (Punch, 2002a). For example, when children refused to be interviewed, it was commonly because the interview was viewed as a boring and repetitive task that was too time-consuming to be allowed to invade their limited play time in school (e.g., “I already told you these things in chats”; “I do not have time for this, I need to do X (often a game’s name) at that time”). Since interviews always happened in class break time, some children claimed that 30 to 40 minutes’ interview time was too great a curtailment of their time to play. In the case of the “diary programme”, more than half of the children’s withdrawals occurred because they confused it with writing practice (*xie zuowen*, a common task in their Chinese course) and thus showed hostility towards it as an addition to their academic burden. These reflections led me to understand that ways of helping children to feel that the research activities were “fun”, “fresh/new” and “relaxing (different from school tasks)” must be considered a significant element in designing and choosing methods of working with children in the future. Moreover, the gender difference among those children who said “no” to my invitations to interviews and the “diary programme” (more boys than girls) also contributed to my reflections on how my role as a female adult and memories of being a girl shaped my relationships with children and consequently affected their relative degrees of involvement in my study (see Thorne, 1993 and section 3.6).

Therefore, in general, besides contributing to the intensity and diversity of data collection, the inclusion of interviews and the “diary programme” in this project

was successful also in respecting different children's communication preferences, in offering equal participation and free withdrawal, and in adding to my reflections on methods and bias in working with children.

*In-field ethnographic data management and analysis as a tool to boost the intensity of data collection*

Inspired by Knoblauch (2005) and Pink and Morgan (2013), besides the combination of data collection methods discussed above, in-field ethnographic data management was a further tool that contributed to this project's intensive and focused data collection. Here, in-field ethnographic data management means ongoing ethnographic data collection and analysis happening in the field as an everyday routine.

Ethnographic fieldnotes, as the most important part of this project's ethnographic data, were produced, reviewed and analysed on a daily basis. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:176, emphasis in original) state that '*what* to write down, *how* to write it down, and *when* to write it down' are the questions fieldworkers need to ask themselves when producing ethnographic field notes. In this project, my approaches to *how* and *when* to write down fieldnotes were largely shaped by the *time* and *context* and who the surrounding *people* were (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). For example, as discussed previously, in break time, participant observation in classrooms, hallways, playgrounds and other places in the school, was productive. At such times and in these contexts, busy interactions took place not only between children themselves but also between children and myself (e.g., children never allowed me to stand alone quietly but always came to chat with me and invited me to play with them). Therefore, to ensure the quality of interactions (e.g. by paying full attention to conversations and playing with children) and the confidentiality maintained when note-taking (see section 3.4), I only made mental notes during participant

observation before hurrying to a private space (e.g., my single office<sup>18</sup>, my dormitory room or my seat at the back of the classroom in class time<sup>19</sup>) as soon as I could after the children left<sup>20</sup>. Once I gained “privacy”, I either quickly wrote down brief ‘jotted notes’ (Emerson et al., 2011) in my notebook if I had another observation coming up soon, or, if I had enough time, typed them in my laptop in as much detail as possible while the memory of what had just happened was still fresh.

When writing down either ‘jotted notes’ or detailed descriptions, I followed a commonly cited checklist of *what* to include in ethnographic fieldnotes.

1. *Space*: the physical place or places
2. *Actor*: the people involved.
3. *Activity*: a set of related acts people do
4. *Object*: the physical things that are present
5. *Act*: single actions that people do
6. *Event*: a set of related activities that people carry out
7. *Time*: the sequencing that takes place over time
8. *Goal*: the things people are trying to accomplish
9. *Feeling*: the emotions felt and expressed

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<sup>18</sup> See section 3.6 for discussion of my choice of offices: one single office and one desk in an office shared by teachers in P5 and P6.

<sup>19</sup> In class time, my seat at the very back of classroom also provided me with a “private” environment because children needed to stay in their own seats and could not come to see what I was writing.

<sup>20</sup> Emond (2004) reflects on her practice of ‘escaping’ to the bathroom or her bedroom to take down fieldnotes during observation and participation. As she said, such ‘escape’ can be problematic in some situations because ‘constant disappearances [can interrupt] the natural rhythms of the conversation and the group’s functioning, as well as creat[ing] suspicion concerning what it was that [the researcher] was recording’ (Emond, 2004:197). Therefore, in the field, I tried to avoid suspicious ‘escapes’ but held on to mental notes as well as I could until the children left.



(Spradley, 2016:78, emphasis in original)

Following this checklist, I produced the “descriptive” part of my everyday ethnographic fieldnotes. This “descriptive” part recorded what I had seen, heard and done in that day’s participant observations while observing, chatting and playing with P5 children.

Apart from this “descriptive” part, another part of each day’s ethnographic fieldnotes was reflexive and analytical, consisting of comments on each observed event (such as my feelings, and what I had learnt from my daily ethnographic fieldwork from theoretical, practical and ethical perspectives). The “reflexive and analytical” aspect of fieldnotes mattered because data collection and data analysis cannot be separated (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005: 971); specifically, since ethnography is ‘a double process of textual production and reproduction’ (Atkinson, 1992:5), ongoing reflection and analysis of fieldnotes enables ethnographers to collect and analyse data simultaneously (Emerson et al., 2011:123). Therefore, each evening in the field, after completing the “descriptive” part of that day’s fieldnotes, I first read them carefully to add my theoretical thoughts about the episodes, actions, and dialogues that were most related to my research questions, then summarized and highlighted the salient terms, concepts and phrases that had emerged (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Punch, 2009). Subsequently, I questioned how my personal values and experiences and characteristics shaped my approaches, feelings and focuses in that day’s participant observation (Thorne, 1993). For example, I asked why I found a certain episode or dialogue interesting, or why these children were active while those children were quiet. Moreover, such ongoing reflection and analysis of fieldnotes supported the record of my changing understandings and interpretations of the observed issues and experiences in the research field (Clifford, 1990; Davies, 2008). Sometimes, what happened on one day evoked memories of and reflections on other episodes occurring in past days, and I could then return to re-read and re-reflect on those days’ fieldnotes to add new comments and ideas.

Therefore, through (re)reading, (re)reflecting, (re)analysing and (re)writing (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Emerson et al., 2011) both “descriptive” aspect and “reflexive and analytical” aspect of ethnographic fieldnotes, the in-field ethnographic data management and analysis significantly worked as a impetus to enable continuous updating of the direction of my data collection in the field. Through these tasks, it became increasingly clear what I needed to know, what to focus on, and where to improve. I could then identify certain points that demanded further investigation and that I had neglected in previous fieldwork. Therefore, this awareness contributed considerably to the intensity of data collection during this project’s relatively short fieldwork time.

In this study, apart from these important ethnographic fieldnotes, the use of various recording devices to gather as much material as possible in relation to the research questions (Knoblauch, 2005; Pink and Morgan, 2013) contributed greatly to the intensity of data collection. The recording devices employed in this project included: a smartphone and a notebook to record and store quick notes; a laptop to record and store detailed fieldnotes and other related materials; an audio recorder for interviews and other talk-based events related to my research questions; and a photo-camera and iPhone app for recording and scanning a wide range of visual information.

In this project, in comparison with interview-based audio data, visual data offered a wider range of information. Visual data include material such as: photos of the campus, dormitories and classroom decorations; children’s friendship diaries that they shared with me; paragraphs from school textbooks about children’s relationships with friends and other peers; children’s Chinese writing practice work about friends and friendships, such as essays (e.g., “my friend(s)”, “a memorable experience with my friend(s)”, “friend(s), I want to tell you...”). These visual data were not only useful for memory recall (Radley et al., 2005; Pink, 2007), but also contributed to data analysis. For instance, when I took photos of school decorations, I noticed that there were many pictures of

Lei Feng<sup>21</sup>, and printed quotations from the Chinese classic texts (*Di Zi Gui*<sup>22</sup> and *Sanzi Jing*<sup>23</sup>) and great Chinese minds (e.g., philosopher Confucius). These photos, then, contributed to the idea of exploring the influence on children's friendships of propagandized collectivist values and traditional Confucian virtues (see Chapter 7). Therefore, although I did not have enough time to transcribe the audio and visual data for in-depth analysis during my intensive fieldwork period, the process of collecting these data frequently inspired me to generate some important ideas.

In sum, as discussed in this section (3.3), I am confident that ethnography was the most appropriate methodology for my research, and I have updated my research plans from different perspectives (such as research setting, sampling, data collection methods) to address the practical challenges (such as updated topics and shortened fieldwork time-scale) that I experienced when moving my research from the desk to the “real” field. Although there are still limitations in my study (see section 3.6 and Chapter 8), by engaging in the previously discussed in-field practices, this project successfully gathered satisfactory data with which to answer my research questions as presented in the following findings chapters.

As a response to the less-developed idea of ethics in children-related studies in China (see Chapter 2), this study included ethical considerations affecting research design and practice. Therefore, the following section will shift its perspective in reviewing the data collection process from the intensity of data to the practice of ethics in working with Chinese children in school.

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<sup>21</sup> A well-known soldier used in propaganda for socialist and collectivist spirits (see Chapter 7).

<sup>22</sup> This classic text focuses on the basic Confucian requisites for being a good child, a good student and a good person. It details the guidelines for dealing with relationships with others.

<sup>23</sup> This classic text shows an emphasis on teaching young children about the Confucian virtues.

### **3.4 Ethics**

Ethics is an essential aspect of studies (ESRC, 2015). It is particularly important in studies with children (Alderson and Morrow, 2011) because they are relatively lacking in power and subordinate in a society dominated by adults' discourse (Gallagher, 2009a). Thus, ethical rigour is needed to protect them from harm and to guarantee their wellbeing in research (Morrow, 2005). This research followed the University of Edinburgh's level-2 ethical approval requirements and experiences gained from a pilot study in August 2015 on the design of its approaches to ethics. This section discusses how I responded to the ethical implications of openness, trust, commitment and confidentiality in different situations (Burgess, 1989:60) in the field.

#### **3.4.1 Informed consent**

The framework for research ethics provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2015) defines informed consent as the process of giving prospective participants 'sufficient information about the research and ensuring that there is no explicit or implicit coercion' (p.29). Such information is the fundamental basis on which 'prospective participants can make an informed and free decision on their possible involvement' (ESRC, 2015:29). Obtaining informed consent in ethnographic fieldwork is a challenge since it is not a one-off task but an ongoing process (Gallagher, 2009a). Therefore, I viewed gaining informed consent as a two-stage work: initial informed consent gained when recruiting research participants, and ongoing check for informed consent during the whole fieldwork process.

Before I entered the research setting, I designed different versions of informed consent forms and research information leaflets for children and adults respectively (see Appendices III to IX), to prepare for the first stage of gaining informed consent. After successfully entering Central Primary School, I initially used an introductory talk to present myself, my research plan and the ethical

principles applied in this study<sup>24</sup> to all the school's staff in their staff meeting. Subsequently, I gained informed consent from all these adults, who are important in children's school days. I then organized two introductory talks in the P5 (1) and P5 (2) classes to gain the children's informed consent. During the talks, apart from introducing myself and my research plan, I repeatedly highlighted that the study was not a piece of schoolwork and that it was not mandatory to accept my request for their participation (Gallagher, 2009a). In addition, although the main focus of my research at that time was friendship with peers among children of migrant parents (see section 3.2), I emphasized that children from all different types of families were welcome to take part in my research. This pre-field decision was made not only to respect the diversity of these children's peer groups (which were likely to include peers from different family backgrounds – some of whom might also have migrant parent(s), while some might not), but also to protect children from feeling labelled and singled out, considering the risk of stigma faced by children of migrant parent(s) as discussed in Chapter 2. This welcoming attitude towards all the children regardless of family background significantly helped me to save time by avoiding the need to re-recruit (see section 3.3.3.1) and gain informed consent from new participants after I expanded my focus to encapsulate the “big picture” of these rural Chinese children's friendships with peers at this boarding school. Such a welcoming attitude also saved me from the need to officially update informed consent (e.g., through a reuse of paperwork, or a talk), because in everyday conversations, I noticed that almost all these children described my research in the way I had introduced it, namely as “friendship study”, with no mention of children of migrant parents.

To ensure that the children could freely double-check the information included in the introductory talks at any time, I also distributed to them the printed research information leaflets and the children's informed consent forms (see

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<sup>24</sup> Since ethics in children-related studies in China is a less-developed idea (see Chapter 2), I used this introductory talk as a chance to set up ethical ‘ground rules’ (e.g., children as research participants; approaches to maintain confidentiality and anonymity).

Appendices). In contrast with the ones for adults (see Appendices), in these documents for children I used simple and child-friendly language to describe my research and emphasized my need for new knowledge (Mauthner, 1997) by saying that my aim was “to find out more about children’s friendships”.

Since my introductory talks were conducted on a Monday, in the intervening weekdays I followed up children’s understandings of the research plan and the ethical principles both in informal conversations and in a “Question and Answer” event, before they took the research information leaflet (adult edition) and the parental consent form back home on Friday afternoon to gain guardians’ permission. After negotiating with some children’s guardians, who were concerned that the research might take up their children’s study time, I gained permission from all 49 children and their guardians to use them as my research participants<sup>25</sup>.

After completing the first stage of gaining informed consent, checking and re-gaining informed consent or having it withdrawn took place continuously throughout the course of my fieldwork. For example, although all 49 children gave their informed consent to join in with the research, not all of them participated actively in the subsequent project. Therefore, I had to double-check their informed consent, especially when I noticed that some children did not want to talk to me, or even ran away when I tried to talk to them. In addition, when I witnessed some sensitive issues, such as serious chats taking place between children and their teachers about children’s everyday behaviour (such as some boys’ habit of pursuing girls as discussed in Chapter 5), I did not take the consent for granted but double-checked with them for permission to include such conversations as data. Moreover, since an ethnographer’s control over the research process is limited (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), I also dealt with some ongoing informed consent issues that emerged during my public observations. For instance, I sometimes noticed that some non-participants,

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<sup>25</sup> See the reflections on my “success” in participant recruitment in section 3.6.

such as children from other primary years, just walked in on observations to interact with existing participants in the playground. In order not to disturb these children's interactions, I recorded my participants' interactions with sudden 'drop-in' people but did not disclose the latter's personal details (e.g., concerning some child participants' actions to raise funds from schoolmates, who were not child participants, in an episode of donation used in section 7.3.1).

In comparison to the above-discussed ongoing process of gaining informed consent in ethnographic fieldwork, 'one-off' informed consent for interviews was given by interviewees before the start of interviews. Paper-based informed consent forms were signed by adult interviewees. Since the informed consent forms signed by children and their guardians at the beginning of fieldwork involved consent for interviews, I chose to orally re-confirm informed consent with child interviewees. In this process, I particularly highlighted the anonymity and confidentiality of recorded interview data and children's right to withdraw their participation at any point during the interviews.

### **3.4.2 Anonymity and confidentiality**

Anonymity is an important ethical principle when protecting research participants from being identified in the research output (Gallagher, 2009a). To ensure anonymity, in written output pseudonyms were assigned both to the school ('Central Primary School'), the location of the school ('Grassland Township'), and all research participants. The children's pseudonyms employed in this work were provided by the children themselves. The act of asking children to choose their own pseudonyms not only helped to anonymize the participants, but also helped me to gain credibility, since this visual demonstration of anonymity showed the children how I was protecting them from being identified in my research. In this written work, other involved adult respondents were referred to by their relationships to the child participants, for instance as "teacher" or "mother".

Moreover, to further prevent recognition of these involved children and adults, their specific identities were carefully hidden in my writing (Rossman and Rallis, 2012). For example, to discuss the role of student leaders' influence on children's friendships, some student leaders' words were cited in the findings' chapters. Since student leaders formed a small group of children (see Chapter 6), to prevent recognition of these children from my output, I did not include their particular positions, such as classroom monitor, but only categorized each one as "student leader". The same logic was applied to avoid disclosing adults' individual identities. Since each class has only one class teacher, to avoid the risk of identifying them, when citing their words I only referred to the person as "a teacher" instead of, for example, P5 (1)'s class teacher.

When dealing with privacy of information in the field, I employed various strategies to ensure confidentiality. To store all original research-related materials safely and confidentially, I saved these documents in a password-protected computer, myself being the only person with access to these original documents. In the field, the biggest challenge to confidentiality of information arose when I made real-time field notes with children around me. As noted by other scholars, it was difficult to keep my main notebook private in the field (Thorne, 1993). In this situation, I noticed that the children often grew excited when they saw that my notes recorded interactions between girls and boys, fuelling romantic gossip which annoyed the children involved (see Chapter 5). After a while, I found that there were certain "sensitive topics" which, when recorded, could easily annoy the children, such as chase games and conflicts between boys and girls. They viewed these records as evidence of their inappropriate behaviour (like the incidents that student leaders recorded every day, see Chapter 6). Thus, when I was surrounded by the children in the field, I took mental notes and jotted notes (Emerson et al., 2011) in my notebook in public places, then used them to jog my memory when I typed up detailed notes in my own dormitory room without any children around.



As will be discussed in Chapter 4, children view the act of sharing confidential matters as a token of intimacy. In this case, maintaining confidentiality is not only an ethical issue, but also affects my relationships with children (see section 3.6). For example, in the diary programme, I noticed that some children would use a very light-coloured pencil or pen to write down some experiences (e.g., conflicts with friends, things that confused them when dealing with everyday relationships in school) to share with me (always asking for advice) so that they could erase the words or use a dark marker pen to cover up the information. So I also made it a rule to use pencil when responding to them or inviting them for a private chat in order to support and comfort them.

### **3.4.3 Knowledge exchange and feeding back to participants**

In this project, I highlighted the importance of child participation in solving some difficulties experienced in my daily research plan. This was not only because I appreciated the idea that children were capable and could function as consultants to support adults' research (Wyness, 2012); it was also a result of my respect for children's right of participation (Article 12, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989). This position then contributed to my practice of knowledge exchange in this project.

Knowledge exchange work was carried out both in and after fieldwork. During the fieldwork, I had many conversations and discussions with children and teachers about my research. For instance, I asked the children and teachers for solutions when I had concerns about how to work with the children. In addition, in informal conversations, the teachers always asked how my research was going and whether I had encountered any problems in reconciling my research plan with the school's timetable or with certain children who needed the teachers' support. In the diary programme, children sometimes wrote down some questions for me about my research, such as "What did you find for your research today?", "Why are you interested in these children's friendships?" and "How did you know about our school and why did

you choose to come here?” Thus, by answering the teachers’ and children’s questions about my research and consulting them when I needed support, I built up regular dialogues between the children and myself in which we exchanged knowledge. These actions could be understood as informal ways of exchanging knowledge and providing research participants with feedback.

Apart from this ongoing daily knowledge exchange, at the end of my fieldwork I organized a farewell event to say goodbye to the P5 children and their teachers. At that event, I gave the children and the teachers a brief presentation to share some experiences and interesting findings about the children’s friendships that I had obtained from the fieldwork. I treated this farewell event not only as an in-field opportunity to give feedback to the participants, but also as a chance to generally smooth the process of my leaving the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:122). At the farewell event, I gave the children and teachers small gifts to say thank you and goodbye, and I made arrangements for future contact. For example, I provided them with my work email address and maintained the Tencent QQ<sup>26</sup> account that I had used to contact them about my research issues when I was in the field. These measures were aimed at keeping in touch with the participants for the purpose of after-field knowledge exchange, such as sharing my findings with them.

After the fieldwork, I presented my research in different situations: with my academic network, at academic conferences and workshops, and with organizations that work on children-related issues, like UNICEF (China). I exchanged this knowledge both in China and in the international academic field. I also maintained informal conversations with Central Primary School’s teachers and children. For example, I consulted the school’s English teacher about some translation issues (see details in the following section about data management), and replied to the children’s messages in Tencent QQ to tell

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<sup>26</sup> Tencent QQ is a messaging software service in China. It was the most popular chatting software used by both children and teachers in Central Primary School.

them what stage I had reached in my research. Although in my initial research plan I had planned to revisit Central Primary School to present my research findings in front of my child participants, due to the time-scale of this project and my Ph.D. programme, I have not managed to do so. Since the students I worked with were in Primary Year Five in the 2015-2016 academic year, they will have left the primary school in July 2017. Therefore, since I had not completed my final thesis by that point, I did not have the chance to present my findings to them. I am planning to work for a Chinese publication once the thesis is finished, at which point I will share a summary of my findings<sup>27</sup> with children and teachers via emails or Tencent QQ's file sharing service.

#### **3.4.4 Dealing with sensitive issues in practice**

In the ethnographic field, it is possible for the researcher to experience some unexpectedly 'ethically important moments' in the fieldwork (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), such as participants' disclosure of sensitive information. Although I generally tried to avoid topics that might encourage children to disclose sensitive information about themselves, their friends and families, such disclosures were unavoidable after a strong rapport had been built up between the children and myself.

In this fieldwork, I did experience some disclosures of sensitive information in conversations with children. For example, at the end of March, after building up a good rapport, one P5 boy disclosed to me the domestic abuse that he and his mother experienced. As laid out in the ethical review form, I first listened to him carefully to let him know I wanted to help. I then comforted him, but let him know that if he wanted to be helped, I could not guarantee the confidentiality he requested because I was not qualified to protect children and needed to involve professional experts as backup support. After our discussion, he agreed to tell his class teacher about his situation. Having gained his

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<sup>27</sup> In such a summary, I will not share detailed data and examples because, despite the use of pseudonyms, it is likely that insiders could recognize the people involved.

permission, I handed over this issue to the class teacher and the school's director of student affairs. I also provided other optional information about the contact details for children's support, such as the hotline number for the Save the Children Committee (China), thus encouraging 'the children themselves to seek help from the appropriate agencies' (Wyness, 2012:218).

In contrast to the above example of disclosure of sensitive information, responding to children's negative emotions was more frequently experienced in the field. As highlighted in Chapter 2, children's friendships with their peers do not have only a happy side (such as play and companionship), but a negative side as well (such as exclusion, teasing, and disappointment caused by sociocultural rules governing gender, sexuality, and hierarchy in friendship). Therefore, as friendship is an emotionally charged relationship (Greco et al., 2015), exploring experiences of it could cause emotional reactions in children, such as negative feelings when sharing a friend's betrayal.

In this project, after a well-established rapport, in both interviews and everyday chats it was common for children to come to complain about their negative experiences with friendship and to ask for suggestions. Such complaints were always emotionally charged (e.g., the child was upset, angry, or crying). Through observations and discussions with children, I noticed that, in such situations, being able to control the "path" of conversations and being offered "confidential/private" comfort was something they expected. Therefore, I worked together with them to create some signals for "stop"<sup>28</sup>, a device which not only allowed children to stop the conversations whenever they wanted to, but also respected their preference for keeping the comforting process private. I kept children in the interview room until they calmed down and cleaned their faces (if they cried) or I brought upset/crying children to the cosy interview

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<sup>28</sup> In the field, I observed that children did not feel comfortable about straightforwardly saying "no" or "stop" in front of adults when they felt embarrassed or uncomfortable around certain topics. Consequently, after consulting the children, we decided to create a sign for "stop" in the interview room, which consisted of the understanding that the conversation would stop whenever they picked up a cushion to hide their face.

room to comfort them, thus preventing our chats from being heard by other children.

In sum, this section (3.4) discusses how I addressed the key ethical considerations regarding informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, knowledge exchange and sensitive moments in practice. Later, in the reflexivity section, I will provide an account of the ethical dilemmas I encountered in my fieldwork when reflecting on my roles, identities and relationships with different parties in the field. My experience cannot enable me to draw up a 'universal' guideline on the ethics of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in educational settings in rural China, because each researcher's experience of ethics in practice is unique and unpredictable as a result of the different roles and relationships he/she played or was involved in during the fieldwork (Burgess, 1989). Nevertheless, I hope to inspire other scholars by offering an empirical resource to call upon when considering ethics in a similar context.

### **3.5 Processing ethnographic data in post-fieldwork and writing up**

When analysing ethnographic data collected as detailed in the previous section 3.3, I noticed that this research refers to many different themes in children's complex and diverse friendships, and I was keen to understand such friendships through describing and interpreting the relations among these themes. Therefore, thematic analysis was the ideal choice because it is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79). Also, considering this friendship study's emphasis on contexts (see Chapter 2), thematic analysis can emphasize contexts in descriptions and interpretations, and can be conducted within constructionist paradigms (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

In this project, I firstly employed Emerson and colleagues' (2011) suggestion to develop analysis through close reading and coding. They recommend the following procedure:

1. The ethnographer reads through all collected data to combine a close reading (line-by-line) with the earlier insights and lines of analysis produced in ongoing in-field daily data analysis, then produces analytic coding in two different phases – open coding and focused coding – to identify a smaller number of promising ideas and categories from which to provide the major topic and themes for the final written output.
2. To process open coding, the ethnographer reads collected data, such as fieldnotes, line-by-line, to identify and formulate the ideas, themes or issues suggested by this close reading. In focused coding, the line-by-line analysis is conducted on the basis of the topics that have been identified as being of particular interest.

(summarized from Emerson et al., 2011:171-173)

Through in-process close writing, reading and analysing during the in-field data management as discussed in the previous section, some initial memos and open coding were continuously produced when I was in the field. These helped to identify phenomena, dialogues, topics, and categories surrounding these P5 children's understandings and experiences of friendships in Central Primary School. Based on these initial memos and open coding, at the end of the fieldwork I have done some preparatory work that helped to make sense of the documented data and to develop typologies for systematic data analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). For example, some concepts that are closely linked to my research questions were generated, and some themes were picked out and subdivided or categorized into subthemes or broader themes (Punch, 2009; Emerson et al., 2011). After the fieldwork, with the support of this preparatory work, I could easily notice and reflect on some previously coded ideas, themes, categories and topics as well as memos about insights that arose when I was transcribing these audio and visual data and rereading the entire collected ethnographic data. Therefore, I not only

strove to make the initial coding and memos more detailed and clearer, but also created new coding and memos by reflecting on the initial ones. This ongoing analysis offered me a chance to work through patterns across time as well as across themes.

To ensure the rigour of this ethnographic analysis, as highlighted by Morse (2015), in the process of coding, 'same coding decisions (e.g. code descriptions and code using)' (p.1218) must be made. This is a crucial rule because it could ensure the consistency of coding. Through the ongoing process of re-reading data and codes, I carefully checked with the codes to re-examine the extent to which some patterns were contradicting each other. When I noticed a pattern containing contradictory information, I rethought the previous analysis and added dimensions to further develop the coding. Apart from checking the consistency of coding decisions by myself, 'external audits' (Morse, 2015) also significantly contributed to my goal of achieving rigour. For example, I also developed code categories by sharing some anonymized and translated aspects of my original data with my supervisors to enable them to check my emerging coding.

Through the above process, I was able to structure themes into the four findings chapters that follow. This work of grouping my data into themes which then became chapters was organized and governed by my 'in-process analytic writing' (Emerson et al., 2011:79). As suggested by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005:970), writing is 'a method of inquiry' in at least two senses: it is 'a method of data collection by gathering together all sorts of data' and 'a method of data analysis by using writing to think'. It was through this writing process (e.g., various drafts of chapters) that I began to 'identify and explore initial theoretical directions and possibilities' (Emerson et al., 2011:123). Moreover, in the process of writing, I kept sharing my writing with my supervisors to get feedback on my analysis and writing, and this feedback has significantly contributed to the rigour of this research, particularly regarding the appropriate presentation of data. For instance, why did I choose these particular examples?

Which other children talked about this issue? Who are the actively engaged children and who are the “quieter” ones? Again, as ‘external audits’ (Morse, 2015), these feedbacks always led me to step back to review my writing and go back to my data to clarify and reflect on what I had written. This helped me to reduce the risk of ‘cherry-picking’ to support or refute an analytical theme (O’Dwyer, 2004; Morse, 2015) in my analysis and writing.

Translation was another task that I focused on in post-fieldwork analysis and writing. This project’s fieldwork was conducted in China, and all the data were recorded in Chinese. Considering the fact that Chinese-English translation is highly time-consuming, I kept my raw data and analysis in Chinese, carrying out the work of translating from Chinese to English only when I needed to share examples of coding and analysis with my supervisors as a test of research rigour or to quote certain children’s exact words when writing up. I consulted Central Primary School’s English teachers when I was unsure of how to translate some terms, especially those in their local dialect. I believe that local teachers who shared the same dialect as the children and accompanied them on a daily basis would be able to understand the children’s meaning more accurately than professional translators. In the process of dealing with translation issues, I noticed that some Chinese characters did not match English words well. Therefore, I followed Malinowski’s (1922) recommendation to give these characters a detailed interpretation when using them in writing, and in addition to provide a Glossary (see Appendix I).

However, in this project, translation not only means translating from Chinese to English but also includes interpreting local dialect terms in Mandarin (Chinese). I viewed the dialect terms frequently used by children in conversations with them as an important part of their language which can help adult researchers like me to understand the children’s world (Alldred and Burman, 2005). For instance, the term “yao”, as discussed in Chapter 5, is an important term in dialect that can represent the children’s attitude toward cross-gender interactions. Through discussing the meaning of “yao” with children, I



gained additional information about their embedded gendered expectations in everyday behaviour involving cross-gender interactions. Translation from local dialect to Mandarin was conducted in the field with the children's support. Such work is done not only to ensure that the translation accurately conveys the participants' original meanings (Koulouriotis, 2011), but also to show my respect for children's participation in my research process as a whole, including analysis and writing up as well as data collection.

In sum, this section discusses this project's post-fieldwork data analysis to explain in detail how I developed analysis based on the preparatory work carried out during in-field data management and how I ensured rigour in the analysis. In this project, rigour is considered not only in the data analysis and writing up stages but in the whole research process. Since 'reflexivity in qualitative research is usually perceived as a way of ensuring rigor' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004:275), in the following section I will step back and offer a reflexive account to 'understand the influence of their own meanings on the research process' (Davis, 1998:331) through 'a constant mirroring of the self' (Foley, 2002:473).

### **3.6 Reflexivity**

In Social Science, reflexivity is viewed as a significant step towards achieving the goal of rigour through reflecting on 'the intimate relationship between the researchers and their data' (Morse, 2015:1213). In ethnography, reflexivity is particularly salient because of the especially close involvement experienced by the ethnographers in their studied society and culture (Davies, 2008:4). Therefore, through a range of techniques for doing reflexivity (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Forbes, 2008), ethnographers themselves and their readers can gain access to understand:

[how the ethnographers'] location of self (e.g. within power hierarchies and within a constellation of gender, race, class and citizenship.) [...] are imposed at all stages of the research

process – from the questions they ask to those they ignore, from who they study to whom they ignore, from problem formation to analysis, representation, and writing. (Hertz, 1996:5)

There are various perspectives (such as social location, emotional responses to the respondents, academic and personal biographies, ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in data analysis etc.) from which to do reflexivity (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). This section mainly focuses on the reflections on researchers' roles and relationships with different groups of locals in the field.

Gaining access in ethnography is an ongoing process (Bryman, 2012:439). During this process, ethnographers always adopt various roles and negotiate different relationships with different people (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Different patterns of field relations have a range of advantages and disadvantages and could bring fieldworkers various opportunities and restrictions during the research process (Thorne, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Atkinson et al., 2001; Davies, 2008). In the early stage of my research, I struggled with the pros and cons caused by locals' assumptions of my "political identity".

I alerted myself to reflect on such a "political identity" even before entering the field. Being inspired by the idea that reflexivity should cover all the research stages from beginning to end (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003), I started to use a research diary as a technique to support my reflexivity once I had conducted initial dialogues with my inside contact. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of December 2015, after an online chat with Ms Aiping, I noted the following words:

...after I wrote to Aiping that I am a bit nervous about the forthcoming fieldwork (e.g., I particularly mentioned my concern of living alone in the school in weekend as a young woman, and asked whether or not there will be other female teachers staying in the school during the weekends), she sent me a surprised emoji and wrote 'doctor, doctors who come

here (Grassland Township) are all “*fu chuji*”<sup>29</sup>. What does this mean? What is the “hidden message” behind her answer? Also, why does she mention “*fu chuji*”? I feel that she is making a connection between the educational achievements with political levels? Does she mean ‘doctors are powerful’ then nobody will ‘mess up’ with me? Does this mean my educational identity (a Ph.D. candidate, holding Chinese governmental scholarship) and my ways of gaining contact with her (support from higher governmental authority) make her feel that I ‘am’ powerful or are likely have a ‘bright’ political future to be powerful? If my inside contact sees me in this way, how about other locals? Will they see me in the same way? If they see me the same way, how will this assumption shape their attitudes, behaviours and expectations in front of me?

Davies (2008:5) claims that ‘the disciplinary and broader sociocultural circumstances under which [researchers] work’ significantly shape their experiences in the field. Chinese educational institutions are politicized (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004). My concern over being identified as someone politically ‘powerful’ was rooted in the assumption that visitors’ political power can push them away from local ordinary people’s ‘voices’ and even from the ‘truth’. This assumption comes from the commonly reported hostility displayed by ‘ordinary people’ (*laobaixing*) to ‘office-holders’ (*dangguande*) in Chinese studies (e.g., Thøgersen, 2006:113). Furthermore, as a native Chinese who grew up in mainland China, I found this assumption strengthened by my own childhood memories of being required by teachers to follow the pre-designed and practised ways of acting and answering in the surveys run by officials from higher educational institutions.

To respond to this concern over my ‘political identity’ in the field, I decided to raise the level of self-disclosure to Ms Aiping. Deciding ‘how much self disclosure is appropriate or fruitful’ (p.91) is a common problem faced by ethnographers in relation to impression management in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In Ms Aiping’s presence, the amount I disclosed about

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<sup>29</sup> “*Fu chuji*” is a bureaucratic term which refers to a bureaucratic grade held by some government officials, such as County Vice-director.

myself was measured to specifically highlight my lack of both political background and ambitions. For example, I talked about my family background and academically-oriented career plan. Through such self-disclosure on my part, Ms Aiping started to remove the 'political label' from me and even supported me in avoiding some public events (such as a seminar with local schools' head teachers and the head of the education bureau), to which I was invited by the local authority, posing the risk to me of being labelled an 'expert' and 'someone who was important and valued by politically powerful people'.

Although this strategy seemed to work with Ms Aiping, it did not mean that the threat of being politically identified was over. From chats about personal experiences, Ms Aiping and I were surprised to find that we came from the same hometown and had very similar experiences (e.g., we attended the same high school, we moved to the same city for undergraduate study, and our universities were located on the same street). Kjellgren (2006) notes that hometown belonging plays a significant role in Chinese people's interpersonal relationships, especially when people move to a different community from their original one. Similarly, Ms Aiping was very excited about our shared hometown belonging. After I entered the field, she highlighted this fact to all the new people that we greeted. In Ms Aiping's words, our shared hometown belonging and experiences established "*yuanfen*" between us. As noted by Ho (1998:8), "*yuan*" (a simplified way to refer to "*yuanfen*") provides Chinese people with 'a cultural explanation for the formation of interpersonal relationships on the basis of predestined affinity'. Because of this belief in the "*yuanfen*" between us, Ms Aiping's attitude towards me became personalized. During our conversations, she not only changed the way she spoke to me – shifting from an official tone, involving the use of Mandarin and professional language, to our casual and relaxed hometown dialect – but also enthusiastically vouched for me in front of Grassland Township's education authority and Central Primary School to obtain the research permission that I needed. Fortunately, through the close relationship with Ms Aiping, I successfully entered a strictly managed school

setting in China's tightly controlled and politicized educational context. However, "*guanxi*" (relationships) in China is 'not simply a dyadic structure, but a triadic one, which includes the observer' (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010:337). The risk caused by our closeness (Hammersley, 1992) as displayed by Ms Aiping (e.g., she called me "*meimei*", which means 'younger sister' in Chinese, sent me to the school, supported me by preparing the dormitory room, and came to school to visit me, bringing food), again attached a 'political label' to me in the eyes of the school's teachers.

As reported by other ethnographers, in organizational fields where people have limited knowledge of social research, field researchers are frequently suspect (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). They are often assumed to be officials or professional consultants hired by higher authorities to investigate or evaluate the performance of an organization or its staff (e.g. Hunt, 1984). As my study gained support from higher governmental authority, it was natural for the school authorities and teachers to suspect that I had a close relationship with such authorities. Their suspicion was then "confirmed" when Ms Aiping, who herself held a high political position in Grassland Township as the deputy mayor, enthusiastically supported my research and displayed closeness to me. Therefore, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was suspected by teachers and school authorities alike of being an expert on primary education, hired by the higher educational authority in the name of "research" to covertly investigate and evaluate Central Primary School's educational performance, or of being a girl from a powerful family with a strong political network within the government of the township or the district.

Such suspicion was significantly embodied in the language codes used by these teachers in conversations with me. Thøgersen (2006) notes that "the Chinese language" is in itself a political construct' (p.111). Therefore, the languages used by the locals in communications with the ethnographer can indicate their assumptions about the purpose of the ethnographer's visit. For example, Thøgersen (2006) uses "Baixingese" and "Ganbunese" to refer

respectively to the language codes used by 'ordinary people' (*laobaixing*) in everyday conversations and the 'official language of the state apparatus' (p.112) used in public documents and announcements. In his study, he noticed that because they came as foreign visitors in the company of a cadre from the township, the locals viewed the purpose of their visit as to 'investigate' (*kaocha*) local conditions; consequently, in interviews, the translators 'not only translated from the local dialect to standard Chinese but also from Baixingese to Ganbunese' because their interviews were marked as 'official occasions where Ganbunese was the correct code to use' (Thøgersen, 2006:114). Similarly, in my case, given the previously discussed suspicions about my identity, teachers not only tended to use 'Ganbunese' (Thøgersen, 2006) but also spoke Mandarin instead of dialect when communicating with me.

These suspicions not only created in me a persistent feeling of "cold" distance, as embodied in the language codes used by others, but also presented a challenge to my practices of ethics. In the field, having successfully recruited and gained informed consent from all 49 child participants, I reflected on why I had been so successful in this task. I particularly questioned why the children who had not gained their parents' permission at the beginning were so upset and cried. One root could be traced back to teachers' suspicion of my political background/power and the purpose of my visit. Svensson (2006) notes, regarding her fieldwork in China, how the ethical dilemmas and conflicts experienced in the field 'related both to the relationship between the fieldworker and people in the field as well as to the relationship between different groups of people in the field' (p. 263). In conversation with the children, I became aware that when I was not present, their teachers broke our ethical agreement not to intervene in their decisions. These children were encouraged to join in my research to show me their cooperative spirit (*hezuo jingshen*) and their willingness to help people (*leyu zhuren*) because their participation was not only for themselves but also for the good impression it would create of their class and the entire school. In this case, because of the nature of teacher-

student relationships in the school context (Davies, 2015) and the embedded Chinese Confucian-collectivist values, which encourage the obedience to authorities such as teachers, and collective orientation (e.g. Wang and Mao, 1996; Zhou et al., 2012, see Chapter 7), it was difficult for an individual child to refuse to join in my research.

Therefore, in light of Freeman's (1998) comment that social and cultural norms and values can be prioritized over children's welfare, I was concerned that an individual child's own willingness to participate in research would be replaced by the norm of adherence to the teacher's prescription to contribute to collective interests. Guillemin and Gillam (2004:276) suggest that reflexivity applied to ethical practices in research can develop means of addressing and responding to the ethical dilemmas experienced. Therefore, aware of the risk that my extreme success at recruitment and at gaining informed consent from children on the first try might have been achieved through taking advantage of the unbalanced power relationships between teachers and students, and through the teachers' wish to please me, I valued all the more the importance of continuously checking for informed consent in my fieldwork (see section 3.4).

Considering the negative effect of such suspicion on both my relationships with teachers and the ethical principles emphasized in this research, I used strategies of 'impression management' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:87) to manage my relationships with teachers, the focus being on access and acceptance (Punch, 1986). I tried to present my position as that of a learner (Wall et al., 2010), a student, a young researcher, eager to learn from them, who needed their help to finish her work, and as a 'normal, regular, decent' social person (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:89), who had certain things in common with them, enjoyed engaging in mundane small-talk, and wanted to get to know them well.

In this process, I not only used self-disclosure through my "life stories" to demonstrate that I was not an "expert" or a "girl from a powerful family", but

also showed them through my actions that I was an ordinary person just like them. For example, I adapted my “lifestyle” at Central Primary School to resemble that of the other teachers: I dressed simply like them, paid the same money for food in the canteen, lived in teachers’ accommodation etc. I also carefully managed interactions with Ms Aiping (e.g., I refused her regular visit and only met her outside school). Moreover, I showed my strong determination to stay and learn (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:91). In my fieldwork time, the school offered me two workplace options: one was a single room used as a consulting room for children of migrant parents, while the other one was a desk in the office shared by teachers of Primary Years 5 and 6. At first, I only accepted the single room, since I felt that a private single office was good for fieldwork note-writing and private work, such as interviews. However, since the single room was in the dormitory building rather than the main building, and I mainly stayed with the children, I always felt I was outside the school teachers’ community. To gain opportunities to enter the teachers’ network, I discussed the matter with the school and accepted the place in the shared teacher’s room as well. When I was in the shared office, I listened to and joined in the teachers’ conversations, and asked them some questions relating to the fields and topics they were familiar with, such as local customs, the school’s history, and their practical experiences of working with the children. Thus, I showed the teachers my willingness to learn from them about their local cultures and their experiences of working with children in the local context.

In the process of ‘impression management’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), I also did favours for teachers. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:88-89) observe that people in the field sometimes expect fieldworkers to provide services to demonstrate that they are not only ‘exploitative interlopers’ but also have something to give back. Similarly, helping local members of the research setting with some of their tasks is recognized as a strategy for supporting the ethnographer’s access to them, by enabling the ethnographer to find a role (Gomm, 2008), to get involved in the local community, and to build up his or



her credibility (Ryan, 2009). In this project, although I could not take on any supervisory duties in light of the ethical considerations discussed previously, I helped the teachers and the school administration with certain other tasks to show my willingness to contribute (Bryman, 2012:446). Examples include helping to clean the Primary Years 5 and 6 shared teachers' office, and helping the school's administrative staff to edit background music for the school's reading event. The benefit of this work was that, after about a month, I felt the relationship between the teachers and me growing closer. For example, in our chats they joked about their initial misunderstandings and first impressions of me, they started to speak about personal issues with me and invited me to have meals or go shopping together. Such developed relationships promoted communication between the teachers and me.

Having learned from earlier experience (the teachers' suspicions of me fostered by my closeness with Ms Aiping), I was aware that over-rapport with one group can result in restricted relationships and problems of rapport with others (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Gomm, 2008). Therefore, I always tried to find a "point of balance" in managing my relationships with teachers and children in each other's presence. However, there were many situations in which I felt that some of my roles put other roles at risk. Therefore, the following paragraphs seek to discuss the roles I played in front of children and the subsequent tensions I experienced when balancing my relationships with teachers and children.

As noted by Mauthner and Doucet (2003), a researcher's academic biography is one of the factors that shape his/her position in research. From my MSc Childhood Studies at the University of Edinburgh, I adopted the idea that the relationship between adult researchers and child participants matters for the quality of data collection and ethical considerations of children's rights and wellbeing (e.g. Hill, 2005; Gallagher, 2009ab; Punch, 2012). Therefore, in the field, I managed my role as a 'learner' (Corsaro, 2003) and an 'unusual adult'

(Christensen, 2004) to develop good rapport and a more equal power relationship with the children.

When playing the role of 'learner' (Corsaro, 2003) in front of children, I was inspired by Wall and Stasz's (2010) practice of 'situated learning': that is, learning specific skills from locals to appear 'as a novice to be taught' not only certain skills but also cultural norms (p.363). Since I had spent my childhood in cities, I was clumsy when dealing with agricultural work. Thus, I learned from children how to start a fire to cook outdoors, to pick mushrooms, to feed animals, and to use a washboard to do hand laundry by the river. Being an adult but a 'learner' in front of children improves children's confidence in our relationships because it switches children's usual role as 'learner' to adults' normal role as 'teacher' (Johnston, 2017). It also contributes to the intensity of data collection. The process of learning how to do these jobs was always accompanied with chats. Since many children tended to connect playing and working activities (Punch, 2000, 2002b; Yang, 2012), some of the above tasks were labelled 'play/work' activities with friends. Therefore, as in Reynolds's (1991) observation that 'play, songs, laughter and quarrels' generally accompanied child participants' work with friends, the process of learning from children how to do these jobs was always combined with chats, through which I additionally heard stories about children's friends and friendship experiences.

Apart from the above agricultural work, I learned how best to work with the children by consulting them. I valued the importance of listening to children because I believe that they are experts about their own lives (Clark and Statham, 2005; Gallagher, 2009b). In the field, I sometimes organized activities to do together with children. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, in class break time, debates about what kinds of children should be counted as children of migrant parents and how the experience of having migrant parents influences their relationships with friends emerged from my casual chats with a group of children. Since the break time was to end very soon, I proposed to continue such debates in the following days. Considering the sensitivity of these

debates, I consulted children as to what they thought we should be careful about next time. The suggestions offered by these children were much more feasible and detailed than my predesigned child protection plans. For example, they suggested alternative words to replace sensitive and disliked terms, such as “children of migrant parents”; they suggested ways of rephrasing the topics discussed to make them easier to understand; they also helped me to recognize which children we needed to be more sensitive to by observing their emotions if they came to join the discussions. I took all children’s suggestions seriously and implemented them in subsequent collaborations to show my appreciation and respect. As a result, I felt that the children increasingly showed more willingness and confidence in sharing their ideas with me.

To play the role of ‘unusual adult’ (Christensen, 2004), I particularly worked to distinguish myself from the teachers and my participant observations from surveillance. I set myself a “rule” in my research diary: “making sure I sound/look and behave different from teachers”. In seeking to obey this “rule”, I experienced a “battle” about how children should address me. The teachers suggested that the children call me “Teacher” as a mark of respect. However, I insisted that the children call me “*jiejie*” (older sister) to remind them that I was not one of their teachers. In addition, I dressed extremely casually to avoid the “office style” of dress used by the teachers. In terms of my behaviour, to distinguish myself from teachers, apart from creating a casual and friendly atmosphere in interactions with children, by means of relaxing chats, hanging around and playing with the children, I particularly avoided admonishing them or directing their behaviour. However, it was not possible to fully divest myself of the power of an adult and take on the role of a child (James et al., 1998). At least in the early stage of fieldwork, I felt it was difficult for children to distinguish my role entirely from the supervisory role played by the teachers. For example, children still expected me to intervene to impose discipline on their behaviours.

In evening self-study time, children were very noisy. I noticed that when children recognized their chats, laugh and quarrels were loud, they always glanced back at me. I think they are testing my reactions: whether or not I will react like a teacher to stop/blame them. [...] Qian (today's on-duty student leader) came to complain that Ouyang and Bao did not listen to her when she asked them to stop loud laughing. She said "*jiejie*, can you speak with them to ask them to be quiet?" [...] Duan turned around and asked me "*jiejie*, can you discipline them?" when some boys made funny noises. (fieldnotes 10th of March)

Fortunately, ethnography offers researchers time to continuously clarify their roles in the process of building, maintaining and adjusting relationships with research participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Therefore, over time, through continuous conversations, interactions and trust tests<sup>30</sup> (Van Maanen, 1991), children increasingly tended to accept my roles as a friendly older sister and curious researcher into children's friendships, rather than the role of a teacher or a spy. On the one hand, having these roles accepted by children significantly contributed to my relationship with them and so gained me access to their worlds. On the other hand, I sometimes found myself in an awkward position when balancing my obligations to the children and adults in this research. For example, when I witnessed children's behaviour which violated school rules, I felt that there was a conflict between my role as a reasonable adult, who would conscientiously respect the school's rules and report children's misbehaviours, as expected by the teachers, and my role as an unusual adult who would not behave like a teacher by disciplining children. One of my approaches to this kind of situation was to remind the P5 student leaders to notice children who were misbehaving and put a stop to behaviour that went against the school rules. At other times, I would say something like 'Hey, what would you guys do if your teachers came and found you were

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<sup>30</sup> In the early stage of the field, children commonly tested the purpose of my presence (research or surveillance) by checking whether or not I would report their talk and behaviour (especially "inappropriate" examples that went against the school/class rules or teachers' requirements) to their teachers. Therefore, except for the 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004) discussed in section 3.4, as suggested by Bryman (2012), I made sure that information received from children did not get back to teachers or other adults.

breaking the school rules?’ By wording it this way, I wished to let the children know that I did not agree with their breaking the school rules, but also that I was not a teacher who would supervise them or a spy who would report them. I also experienced tensions when teachers and parents asked me to evaluate children’s “*biaoxian*” (performance) at school (Bakken, 2000, and see Chapter 6). In these situations, I always felt pressure from teachers/parents and children: I did not want to judge children or to report their misbehaviours but, if I did not, I felt that I might be letting the teachers and parents down. In such situations, ‘being honest’, ‘highlighting positive things’ and ‘generalizing issues without naming certain children’ were the key rules I followed. For instance, when children’s parents asked about their children’s friendship networks at school (see Chapter 7), I was honest but highlighted the positive things that happened between their children and their school friends. When teachers asked me why the performances of the classes I followed in last evening self-study times were recorded as “poor” by on-duty teachers, I only generalized the issues (e.g., ‘too noisy’) without naming any child. I was aware that if I named any child, teachers would criticize the child. In such a closely connected school context, children could easily find out I was the informer, which would undermine my relationships with children. Fortunately, these teachers gradually asked less often, which, as I suspected, might have been because of their awareness of my unwillingness to disclose children’s names. Although these tensions caused me stress, it also inspired my data collection. Since Hansen (2015: 105) reports that similar ‘dual pressures’ (from teachers and peers, particularly friends) can be experienced by student leaders as well, this personal experience and knowledge gained from literature increased my sensitivity to exploring such topics with student leaders in the field.

Besides the role of unusual adult, my role as curious researcher, who was excited about being involved in any of the children’s in-school activities, sometimes pushed me into even more stressful situations, my desire for rich data leading me to behaviours that violated the school’s rules. For example, in

the field, I sometimes conducted dormitory observations in the P5 girls' two dormitory rooms on Sunday afternoons. In this relatively private and relaxing time and space, girls were chattier and talked about certain topics that were rarely broached in classrooms or in other public areas when teachers and boys were around (such as liking between boys and girls as discussed in Chapter 5). However, the school rules did not allow this kind of behaviour. In fact, the children were required to return to their classrooms immediately after organizing their belongings in their dormitory rooms each Sunday afternoon. Therefore, even when invited by the children to do so, I did not take the opportunity to visit their dormitories every Sunday. I only carried out such visits once I had confirmed that the week's duty teacher was not around. However, my escape from teachers was not always successful. On one occasion the on-duty teacher noticed me making such visits and was unhappy about my overstepping the school rules to chat and play with the children in the dormitory rooms.

Being blamed by teachers in front of children always gave me a sense of losing "face" (*mianzi* – the feeling of being embarrassed and ashamed) (see also Schoenhals, 2016), even though the wording and tone used by teachers when speaking to me were much politer than those used when speaking to children. However, I then realized that the experience of being blamed by teachers in front of children and my consequent embarrassment contributed, to some extent, to the bond between me and the children. One reason is that such experiences and emotions evoked memories of my own girlhood in the primary school years, offering me a way to feel 'in touch with my child self' (Thorne, 1993:25). In keeping with Thorne's (1993) perspective, my emotionally charged memories of being blamed in front of classmates when I was a primary-school-aged girl helped me to move from exploring children's relationships with others in school in a 'more open and lateral way' to 'feeling more deeply inside their worlds' (p.25). Therefore, this shared feeling of losing "face" helped me to understand how heavy the emotional burden was when a

student leader was blamed for failure at her job in front of other students (see Chapter 6 and 7). Another result was that, after children witnessed my emotional upset when I was blamed by teachers, they always came to chat and comfort me, in the same way as I responded to their emotional upset. Similarly to the development of intimacy between children and their close friends (see Chapter 4), this mutual emotional support further contributed to the feeling of closeness between the children and me.

Although the above experience made me view shared experiences between me and the children as resources to contribute to our relationship, I was alert to the possibility that such resources could also present an obstacle in other situations. For example, as a female researcher, my experience of being a girl made me quickly welcomed and accepted by girls and helped me to feel easier about engaging with girls (Thorne, 1993; Kehily et al., 2002). Therefore, in the field, I was always surrounded by girls, and felt closer to girls than boys. As in Thorne's (1993) reflections, I noticed that my feeling of greater closeness to the girls stemmed not only from memories of my own girlhood, but also from the fact that 'I knew more about their gender-typed interactions' (p.26). I found it very easy to talk to, play with and understand the girls. However, while gender opened up some situations for me, it also blocked off others (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:93).

Although I frequently reminded myself to avoid gender bias (e.g., using the name list to remind myself not to ignore boys during chats, interactions and observations, and being careful not to "choose sides" in conflicts between boys and girls), I found that it was difficult for me to engage with the boys as deeply as I engaged with the girls. Not only were the shared interests between boys and me limited; my access to the boys' world was also restricted by gendered spaces in the school. I could visit the girls' dormitory rooms to join in their private conversations and games but, as a female researcher, it was not appropriate for me to have access to boys' dormitory rooms. Therefore, I have

to admit that, in my writing (including both fieldnotes and the findings chapters of the thesis), girls are more prominent than boys.

In sum, this section offers a reflexive account of how I managed multiple roles in various relationships with different groups of people in the field, and how these roles and relationships shaped my research. It highlights the importance of finding a balance between relationships with different parties, because relationships with one party are always observed by others, which means that closeness with one group can result in restricted relationships with others. The section also emphasizes that researchers' experiences, emotions and memories can constitute both a good resource to contribute to the research and an obstacle to make researchers over-focused on certain groups and topics so that others are blocked off.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has not only clarified *why* but also detailed *how* ethnography was practised in this study of rural Chinese children's friendships with peers at school.

It clarifies how, apart from the shared ontological and epistemological positions between childhood ethnography and this project, I chose ethnography because it could help me to deeply interact with rural Chinese children to gain thick descriptions and interpretations of children's understandings and experiences of friendships in particular contexts. These kinds of descriptions and interpretations are central to this project, which has as its focus a relatively new research topic in the context of China. It justifies my choices of research setting, sampling and data collection methods by the research aim and questions and practical considerations. In particular, it discusses the importance of linguistic competence and political support in choosing a research setting, of trade-offs between breadth and depth of investigation in sampling, and of data intensity in deciding on a combination of data collection



methods. It discusses how I obtained informed consent, ensured anonymity and confidentiality, encouraged knowledge exchange and dealt with sensitive issues in the practices of ethics. It continues to reflect on ethical dilemmas by discussing how locals' assumption about my political identity led to teachers' intervention in children's decisions on participation in the research. It offers a reflexive account with a focus on roles and relationships to examine, through self-analysis, how the location of myself (e.g., gender, family background, educational experience, emotionally charged experiences from memories of own childhood and in the field) imposed on my research (Callaway, 1992; Hertz, 1996). It details my approaches to recording and analysing ethnographic data both during and after the fieldwork. It highlights in-field data analysis as both a spotlight on the updating of data collection methods and directions in the fieldwork, and an essential preparation for systematic post-fieldwork data analysis.

The next chapter initiates the discussion of this study's findings as it attempts to present the complexity and diversity of these P5 children's friendships with peers in the context of Central Primary School, a boarding school in rural China.

# Chapter 4 The intimate friendship in children's talk and display

## 4.1 Introduction

As highlighted in Chapter 2, exploring the meanings of “friendship” as constructed by rural Chinese children interacting in the particular context of a primary boarding school is central to this project’s sociological approach. Therefore, in the fieldwork, two key questions discussed intensively with all the P5 children throughout both formal and informal conversations were: “What is friendship?” and “Who is your friend?” Thanks to the combined data collection methods (see Chapter 3), I can combine and compare the children’s statements about “friendship” and “friend” with their actions in doing friendships with different friends and peers. Such combinations and comparisons suggest that the majority of P5 children attached contextual and complex meanings to the terms “friendship” and “friend”. As reported by other scholars as well (e.g., Hundley and Cohen, 1999), children identify different types of friends and distinguish between them. For example, the P5 children in my project used a range of adjectives to differentiate friends, such as “best friend”, “inattentive friend”, “ordinary friend”, “weekend friend”, etc.

This chapter then focuses on the type of friendship that exists between children and their “special” friends. In interviews, when children talked about their understandings and experiences of friendships, many of them liked to give as examples the stories of friendship between themselves and their “special” friends, who were always defined as “best friend” (*zuihao de pengyou*), “good friend<sup>31</sup>” (*hao pengyou*) or “close friend” (*qinmi de pengyou*). In order to highlight this research’s findings about the differentiations made between friendships, I use the term “intimate friendship” when referring to friendship with “special” friends. In this chapter, I discuss both the characteristics of

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<sup>31</sup> In Chapter 7, I give examples in which children and teachers/parents highlighted different aspects of friendship when defining “good friend”.

intimate friendship in these P5 children's talk<sup>32</sup> and the ways in which they displayed (Finch, 2007) intimate friendships to confirm the intimacy between themselves and their "special" friends.

## **4.2 The characteristics of intimate friendship**

When talking about "friend" and "friendship", most children tended to brag that they were friends with many peers, but at the same time to particularly highlight a very small number of same-gender friends whom they described as their "special" ones, using terms such as "best friend". Such nomination of "special" friends, in most cases, was mutual. These mutually nominated children were also very likely to be observed in consistent and close interactions in my participant observation. So, what makes these "special" friends special?

In definitions of interpersonal relationships, intimacy is often presumed to be 'a very particular form of "closeness" and being "special" to another person' (Jamieson, 2005:189). Through a study of intimacy in friendship with Israeli children, Sharabany and colleagues (1981) provided a comprehensive definition of "intimate friends":

...those who mutually nominated each other as such [...] Their relations are characterized by mutual trust and loyalty. They feel free to be sincere, spontaneous, and open about themselves. They tend to know each other's feelings, preferences, and life facts. (Sharabany et al., 1981:800)

Sharabany and colleagues' definition of "intimate friends" is consistent with the characteristics of intimacy in interpersonal relationships as defined by many sociologists, such as Jamieson (1998, 2005 and 2008). Jamieson (2005) describes intimacy as a form of closeness to another person, associated with high levels of trust, and entailing a range of practices, such as close

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<sup>32</sup> Here, "talk" highlights children's self-expression. Therefore, the data used in this chapter consist of what children said about "friend" and "friendship" in conversations (e.g., interviews and informal chats) and what children wrote about "friend" and "friendship" in the "diary programme".

association, familiarity and privileged knowledge, strong positive emotional attachments, and self-disclosure. The above definitions of “intimate friend” and “intimacy” have inspired this project through providing the “general” and holistic qualities of intimate friendship. Since children’s emphasis on aspects of friendship can be understood specifically as contextualized choices (Chen et al., 2004), this section is interested in further exploring the ‘negotiated specificities’ (Pahl and Spencer, 2004:204) of intimate friendships in the particular context of a Chinese rural boarding school.

#### **4.2.1 “*Bangzhu*”, “*mimi*” and “*wan*”: three key elements of intimate friendship in children’s talk**

Pahl and Spencer (2004:207) note that some friendships are based on just one main form of interaction, whereas others are ‘more complex and multistranded’ because of the involvement of the exchange of personal confidences, emotional support, and common interests and companionship. Examples given by these P5 children when explaining the reasons for viewing certain friends as the “special” and “best” ones suggest that the contacts between children and these intimate friends are “multistranded” and largely consist of the factors valued in children’s talk about what an “ideal” friendship should be. Amongst these factors, “*bangzhu*” (help), “*mimi*” (secrets) and “*wan*” (playfulness and companionship) stand out as the ones most frequently mentioned by both boys and girls.

In China, the importance of helping each other has had significant moral and instrumental value attached to it (see Chapters 6 & 7). Therefore, “helping each other” (*huxiang bangzhu*) was a phrase frequently used by all these P5 children to identify a single key factor in a positive relationship with others. They highlighted “helping each other to overcome difficulties and hardships” as the most important aspect of friendship and viewed “special” friends as the most reliable ‘sources of help’ (Willmott, 1987:94) in their everyday school lives. In her interview, Baolin, a P5 girl, offered the following description of how she

and her best friend in the class helped each other. It covers the main types of help given as examples of friendship by these P5 children:

Yingyue is my best friend, she is very nice to me. She always makes me laugh when I am not happy. She is generous to me. When I could not solve some questions in after class work, she taught me. Last time, I forgot to bring colourful pens to art class; she shared her drawing tools with me. I also help her a lot. She sometimes forgets to ask her daddy to top up her canteen card<sup>33</sup>; I allow her to use mine if I have enough money inside. Also, when other people come to cause her trouble, I will help her to quarrel with them. (Interview, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016)

This quotation suggests that the “help” between Baolin and her best friend Yingyue involves different types of support, such as support in comforting and cheering up friends, support in backing up friends in conflicts with other peers, and support in coping with financial hardship and academic shortcomings. Among these multiple sorts of “help”, most of the children particularly emphasized that the emotional support offered by intimate friends was the most meaningful.

Many scholars argue that emotional support is an important part of intimate relationships, such as family relationships and friendship (e.g. Sharabany et al., 1981; Finch, 1989; Brownlie, 2011, 2014; Greco et al., 2015). In some studies, emotional support is defined as talk-based, including actions such as ‘listening, talking, giving advice, and helping people to put their own lives in perspective’ (Finch, 1989:33); while, in other studies, the forms of emotional support are more extensive. For example, Brownlie (2011, 2014) argues that emotional support need not be narrowly framed in talk-based terms. She claims that, in some cases, ‘being there’, which means ‘simply knowing people were there in their lives even if they were never turned to or talked to’ (Brownlie, 2011:463), is also a significant form of emotional support. However, since

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<sup>33</sup> In Central Primary School, the canteen card is used for the cashless catering system, as a feature of school surveillance used to ‘monitor and control pupils’ purchases’ (Taylor, 2012:226).

people's beliefs and practices about emotional support are embedded in their life experiences, the features that are counted as emotional support can be framed in different ways (Brownlie, 2014). In this project, different methods (e.g., interviews, informal chats and observations) offered me different possibilities of exploring the forms of emotional support (Brownlie, 2014:51) in children's talk and interactions. In general, emotional support in these P5 children's intimate friendships was delivered by various means, including sympathetic talking and listening, joyful play, and quiet (that is, with less talking) but patient companionship. However, no matter which method was used, these children commonly highlighted the importance of "physical presence" when being there to meet friends' emotional needs. The emphasis on "physical presence" as part of emotional support, in both children's descriptions and my observations, was based on certain forms of bodily contact (e.g., holding hands, putting an arm around a shoulder, hugging and back-stroking) when boys and girls offered their friends this kind of support.

Emphasis on the importance of emotional support, especially the "physical presence" of being there for friends, in intimate friendships can be understood as a contextualized choice (Chen et al., 2004) related to their life experiences when living in the boarding school environment. Being a residential child means that most of term time is spent far away from the family; therefore, many Chinese boarding school students report that they experience stress caused by a lack of regular contact with their families during the extensive time spent at boarding school (Hansen, 2015:48). Similarly, while the family was referred to by these P5 children as a source of strong emotional support, because of family members always being there to provide love and care, infrequent contact between residential students and their lived-away-from family could reduce the quality of such support, putting some children under stress. In Central Primary School, since children were not allowed to bring mobile

phones to school<sup>34</sup>, they had limited opportunities to contact their families. Children could only use the telephones in the teachers' offices and in the security team's office to call family members when they needed them to come to the school in special situations (e.g. when the children felt unwell or were in trouble). Or they might find limited time (10 to 15 minutes) to chat online with family members in the computer hub after finishing their tasks for the computer science course, which was run twice a week for P5. However, since the issues that caused children negative emotions and difficulties could happen on any day and at any time at school, lived-away-from family could not always be physically present to offer children high-quality and timely support. Jamieson (2005) asserts that 'friends were positioned as rising in significance when kin and/or close family were absent' (p. 191). Unlike distant family, during school time, school friends were highlighted by most children as always physically being there and being easily and quickly reached at difficult times.

The above discussion suggests that school friends could be the most effective and timely source of emotional support in children's everyday boarding school lives. However, in daily observation, it was not only nominated intimate friends but also surrounding peers (e.g., classmates) who quickly responded to comfort upset children because of a feeling of obligation to contribute to a harmonious environment in the "collective" (*jiti*) and to take care of other "in-group members" (*zijiren*) (see Chapter 7). When exploring why intimate friends were more prominent than other caring peers in children's talk about their experiences of receiving emotional support in school, an explanation that frequently emerged was children's apprehension that expressing negative emotions in the public was shameful. For instance, many children claimed that crying in front of classmates and teachers was deemed childish behaviour at their age and might result in teasing by peers. Most girls complained that some

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<sup>34</sup> The school was concerned that usage of mobile phones (e.g., chatting, playing games and surfing the Internet) could "waste" children's study time, thus having a negative influence on their academic performance. See the following chapters for the highly prioritized orientation towards academic performance in Chinese schooling.

boys, when they saw girls crying, liked to laugh at them or even mimic them. Many boys also expressed their concern that crying might cause other boys and girls to look down on them as weak cry-babies. Another small group of children added that crying in front of many peers led to endless annoying queries as to why they were crying. Some of them even suspected that some “caring” peers did not truly care about their sadness but only wanted to satisfy their own curiosity; if these curious peers failed to gain an answer from a crying child, they might spread fake rumours. For instance, Shuyue, a P5 girl, once came to me to complain that she had cried in class because she had forgotten to bring her dance shoes for club and was afraid of being blamed by teachers. However, after seeing her cry, a boy in her class faked a rumour that Shuyue was crying because her parents had gotten a divorce (field note, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2016). As a result of such concerns, most children claimed that they felt safer and more comfortable when releasing negative emotions in front of intimate friends than in front of other peers.

In addition, many P5 children also claimed that, in many cases, only intimate friends could fully understand them and provide the “right” emotional support that they needed. As these children explained, the main reason was that only intimate friends were regarded as trusted recipients of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure can refer to all forms of verbal and nonverbal communication that reveal something about the self, including highly sensitive information, such as personal secrets (Corsano et al., 2017), as well as to less serious information, such as personal preferences regarding food (Greene et al., 2006). The place of self-disclosure in the formation of intimacy in relationships is a topic that has been thoughtfully discussed. Giddens (1992) believed that mutual self-disclosure between equals is the most crucial practice in forming intimacy. His argument has been criticized by other scholars as overemphasizing the importance of self-disclosure in intimate relationships (e.g., Jamieson, 2005, 2011). In my fieldwork, although it was not all about self-disclosure, self-



disclosure was still a crucial practice of intimacy that was valued in these P5 children's intimate friendships.

In daily observations, children were chatty with their friends. As noticed by Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield (2018), topics in friendship talk can be 'trivial'. Indeed, in these P5 children's chats, most of the conversation consisted of 'trivial' thoughts and feelings about celebrities, TV shows, stories, gossip, and computer games, etc. These 'trivial' topics in everyday chats undoubtedly contribute to intimacy between children and their intimate friends through the feeling they create of sharing interests, knowing each other well, and spending time together to catch up (Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018). However, compared with these trivial topics, the disclosure of highly sensitive information granting access to private matters and secrets (Rosenfeld, 2000) received more emphasis as the "glue" within friendship (Greco et al., 2015). The reason was that disclosure of such sensitive information not only contributes to deep understanding but also represents a sense of trust. For example, the comment by Yiming, a P5 boy, about secrecy and trust in friendship was echoed by many other P5 children in a group chat:

... telling own secrets to you means trust you. If you tell other people [the secrets], you not only betray your friend but also hurt him/her. He/she will hate you. (Interview, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2016)

Trust is necessary between friends to provide the confident expectation that the friends will keep their commitments to behave properly and that confidences between friends will not be betrayed (Greco et al., 2015). In her discussion of secrets and lies in the family context, Smart (2007:131) argues that openness can not only contribute to an equality of knowledge between equals but can also 'bring with it forms of vulnerability'. One form of vulnerability is caused by 'informational power', in that leaked information might put people at risk (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Therefore, when deciding to disclose confidential information, such as secrets, in front of friends, children in fact simultaneously expose their vulnerability, caused by informational

power. Amongst these P5 children, for instance, liking between boys and girls was one topic that was found exciting. However, in Central Primary School this topic is labelled one for grown-ups rather than for primary school children (see Chapter 5). Once a child's remarks about whom he/she liked was leaked to other peers or a teacher, he/she would face the risk of being annoyed by heterosexual teasing and gossip in peer groups, and blamed by teachers (see Chapter 5). Therefore, to minimize this risk, these P5 children commonly claimed that they were careful to choose the most trustworthy friends as the recipients of self-disclosure containing highly sensitive information (e.g., romantic experiences, attitudes towards peers and teachers, family issues, and changes to their bodies when growing up).

When selecting the friends who were trustworthy enough to receive the disclosure of highly sensitive information, the P5 children commonly showed a preference for "old" friends (*lao pengyou*) with whom they had maintained long-term, stable friendships (Zhang and Tian, 2014:357), or friends who had had similar experiences. For example, there was a cross-class intimate friendship group containing four boys, Xiaoming and Hongyang from P5 (1) and Jingye and Haoran from P5 (2). Amongst these boys, "parents" was a relatively sensitive topic because Haoran had divorced parents and Xiaoming had migrant parents. In a chat with Haoran, he said he only took the initiative to talk about divorced parents with Jingye and Hongyang because they were "trusted old friends since kindergarten" (Field note, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2016). In another chat with Xiaoming, when we incidentally discussed the sensitivity of the topic of "parents" in conversations with friends, Xiaoming commented:

We normally do not ask [friends] this kind of [sensitive] things because it will make people sad. [...] For Haoran, I do not think it [divorced parents] is a thing that I can ask. It would be embarrassing if I asked. He might also not want to tell me. Jingye can ask. Also, Hongyang is fine. [...] It might be because we [Xiaoming and Haoran] have not been friends that long; we have only been friends since we came here [primary school], not like Jingye and Hongyang. They've been good

friends since kindergarten. [...] For me, I also do not want to talk about my parents with Haoran. With Hongyang or Dong<sup>35</sup> are fine because they also have experienced the feeling of having migrant parents. (Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

This was the case not only in conversations with Haoran and Xiaoming but with most other children. Their distinction between “old” friends and “new” friends indicates that “time” has an influence on the degree of closeness in friendship. When expressing the power of “time”, many of them employed a Chinese proverb – “*luyao zhi mali, riji jian renxin*” (it takes a long road to know the strength of a horse, it takes time to know a person) – which was always used to express time’s power of telling and testing all. They believed that ‘a true friendship will stay over time even in and after hardship and difficulties’ (Taozi, a P5 girl, Field note, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016). As explained by Taozi: as time goes by, it becomes increasingly clear whether a friend is trustworthy and reliable (e.g., whether he or she had once betrayed a trust by imparting a friend’s highly sensitive information to others). Xiaoming’s preference for friends with similar experiences (see also UNICEF, 2008) was also expressed by another small group of P5 children. Qian, a P5(1) girl who was a student leader<sup>36</sup>, said to me that she only expressed her anger towards teachers and other peers, caused by her role of student leader, to Bing, a girl who had the same student leader position as Qian in P5(2). She believed that only Bing could really understand her and sympathize with her experiences. For them, friends with shared experiences enabled deep understanding and true sympathy in self-disclosure.

The importance of “time” was not only valued in choosing those friends who were considered trustworthy as recipients of self-disclosure; it was also emphasized in children’s talk about the importance of “*wan*” in an intimate

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<sup>35</sup> Dong is another P5 boy. He was in Xiaoming’s other intimate friendship group. In the fieldwork, it was common to observe that some children had more than one intimate friendship group. One key reason was that some intimates from one friendship group did not befriend intimates from another friendship group.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 6 for a discussion of the student leader system in Central Primary School.

friendship. “*Wan*” can be literally translated as “play”. Play, as a central part of children’s worlds, occupies a significant space in their daily lives (Smith, 2009). Therefore, in children’s friendships, play between friends is valued. Chen and colleagues (2004:207) found that, as indicated by both Chinese and Canadian boys, playfulness and emotional intimacy were more important in their friendships than other aspects of friendship, such as its instrumental aspect (see Chapter 6). Similarly, most of the P5 children in this project shared an idea that “playing together” was another crucial aspect of intimate friendship, because playing with friends brought them happiness and fun (see also Pahl and Spencer, 2004). Amongst these children, a small group who had migrant parent(s) particularly emphasized that, for them, playing with friends not only provided them with joyful play time but also functioned as an effective source of emotional support to help them stay happy when they missed their migrant parent(s). However, again according to observations, “*wan*”, could take place with any peers<sup>37</sup>. So, why did most children especially emphasize “*yiqi wan*” (literally “playing together”) as a signifier of the high level of intimacy between intimate friends?

In these P5 children’s talk about intimate friends, *wan* was not narrowly framed in terms of joyfulness and playfulness but also referred to loyal companionship. For example, most P5 children described the status of “*wan*” between themselves and their intimate friends as “always” and “forever” to highlight that intimate friends should not only be “fun” friends (Pahl and Spencer, 2004) but should also be “loyal” friends. These children, such as Jieyu, a P5 girl, shared the attitude that, in intimate friendship, “playing with this one today and with another one tomorrow is an annoying behaviour” (Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

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<sup>37</sup> Because of the school’s busy timetable, children valued highly their limited free play time. Most children stated that they were keen to join in all interesting games for fun. Therefore, in both children’s talk and my observations, it was common that children took part in joyful play not only with intimate friends but also with other friends and peers. Especially in certain large-scale group games, such as “Run for Time” and “Nametag Ripping Battle” (see Chapter 5), many children happily crossed the boundaries existing between different cliques, between intimate friendship groups, between classes and between genders, just to ensure that they could recruit enough people to play these appealing games.

They believed that this behaviour would reduce the time spent playing with friends, producing in them a feeling of being betrayed and redundant. For them, intimate friends should always “stick together” (e.g., “choose and join in games together” or “bring friends when receiving a game invitation” as some children put it). This relationship between “time” and “play” in intimate friendship is supported by other scholars’ studies. For example, Bukowski and colleagues (1998:1) held that ‘friendships are specific attachments carrying expectations that “best friends” spend more time with one another than “ordinary friends” or “acquaintances”’. Therefore, it is evident that since long-lasting and continuous companionship is viewed as a sign of loyalty towards a friendship, the length of time spent together was employed by these children as an important standard in evaluating the intimacy they shared with their friends.

Moreover, since some children formed themselves into cliques (see also Adler and Adler, 1998), apart from showing loyalty to friendship via “time” spent in “*wan*”, a small group of children added to *wan* the importance of “choosing the right side”. To paraphrase the children’s words, this can be explained as follows: “If you *wan* with me, do not *wan* with her/him/them”. They believed that avoiding people from other cliques and those disliked by one’s friends was a way of showing loyalty towards a friendship. Thus, contextually, the phrase “*wan* with someone” comes not only to mean “play games with someone” but also to carry the more general meaning of “befriending or showing a friendly and nice attitude toward someone” (as explained by Wenhua, a P5 girl, Field note, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016). In daily observation, I noticed that some children, especially girls, became angry with their intimate friends when the latter chatted, played or socialized with other peers, especially peers they did not like.

In addition to the importance of showing loyalty in relation to “*wan*”, as discussed above, intimate bodily contact emerged as a characteristic of “*wan*” between intimates, from talk with a small group of boys and girls after observing their behaviours in a challenging game called “Dare You Do This?”

(*ni gan bu gan?*) (Field note, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016). This game required participants to find another participant with whom to carry out certain challenging tasks together. When these tasks required intimate bodily contact, such as kissing, hugging, and dancing, it was noticeable that the children always chose their intimate friends as partners. The children explained that they only felt comfortable making intimate bodily contact with intimate friends; it would be very embarrassing to make such contact with other peers. These children's opinion was cross-checked with other observations of children, especially girls' free play around campus: intimate bodily contact occurred more between intimates than between ordinary friends and peers. For example, bodily contact between girls and their intimate female friends was very frequently observed in the girls' dormitory rooms. These intimate games included helping each other to dress up and perform romantic dramas involving intimate actions, such as kissing and carrying the partner. During these games, the girls touched their intimate friends' bodies and had intimate discussions about private topics, such as the changes to breasts when growing up. As suggested in the previous discussion about the role of touching when children gave their friends emotional support, in play such intimate bodily contact could also be a sign of intimacy (Morgan, 2011).

The above discussion of "*bangzhu*", "*mimi*" and "*wan*" as the three most frequently mentioned elements of intimate friendship suggest that these P5 children highlighted the intimate friendship as the one that includes a combination of help, self-disclosure, playfulness, loyalty and intimacy (e.g., Sharabany et al., 1981; Clark and Ayers, 1993; Whitesell and Harter, 1996; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; MacEvoy and Asher, 2012). Through offering friends help, disclosing self and providing playful and loyal companionship, children significantly contribute to intimacy with their close friends. Being the reliable, trustworthy and loyal ones for friends to disclose negative emotions to, share secrets with and receive timely support from, continuously strengthens emotional intimacy (Morgan, 2011:35) between intimates. Simultaneously, the

involvement of bodily contact (e.g., in emotional support, play and also secret disclosure<sup>38</sup>) between intimates further enhances the embodiment of intimacy (Morgan, 2011) in their friendship in a physical sense.

#### **4.2.2 Expected particularity and reciprocity in the emotionally charged intimate friendship**

In these conversations about help, self-disclosure, playfulness, loyal companionship and intimacy between intimates, children's expectations of "particularity" and "reciprocity", and the strong emotions attached to such intimate relations with "special" friends, emerged as additional characteristics of intimate friendship.

Most of the boys and girls expressed a similar belief that "special friends need to be treated differently from the others" (Taozi, a P5 girl, Field note, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Boundaries between themselves, their intimate friends, and other peers outside their intimate friendships were commonly compared by these children, as a standard against which to evaluate particularity (Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018): that is, whether they were treated differently, as the "special" ones of their intimate friends. Jamieson (2005) argues that:

...intimacy suggest[s] an absence or lowering of boundaries among intimates in comparison to the presence or heightening of boundaries between intimates and those outside of their intimate relationships. (p. 189)

Indeed, most children demonstrated an expectation of a clear boundary, or even an exclusionary boundary, between themselves and non-intimates. In contrast, when discussing the boundaries between themselves and their intimate friends, the children expressed expectations that there would be no or low boundaries. Although the topic of boundaries was not as prominent in speech as in children's practices of "doing" friendship (see the following

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<sup>38</sup> As in the first example about Juan's secret birthday in later section 4.3 below, bodily contact was involved when children whispered secrets.

section 4.3), it still emerged in some children's narratives of conflicts with intimate friends, especially when the conflicts arose because children were dissatisfied with friends' interactions with other peers.

For example, access to confidential information was set as the "standard" for evaluating the levels of boundaries. Just such a conflict occurred on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2016 in an intimate friendship group consisting of three P5 boys, who mutually nominated each other as best friends. The cause of the conflict was that Hongyang did not openly tell his friends (Xiaoming and Dong) about his romantic secret (he liked Taozi, a P5 girl). Moreover, Hongyang had lied, denying that it was true, when Xiaoming and Dong asked him about the news they had heard from some girls, namely that Hongyang had told Taozi he liked her. Xiaoming and Dong were both angry and disappointed. Xiaoming explained their anger as due to the feeling that:

Hongyang does not trust us, he does not view us as brothers. We always tell him our secrets, but he did not share his secret with us; he may not trust us. It is unfair. When I liked Fanfan (a P5 girl), at the very beginning, I told Dong and Hongyang because they are my brothers and I trust them. We could accept it if Hongyang did not tell us because he was shy. However, we could not accept a lie. He likes Taozi, but he said he did not like her when we asked him. We knew his true heart from other people, from the girls. They told us Hongyang told Taozi he likes her. We are very angry. Even girls knew earlier than us. (Field note, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2016)

As discussed in the above section, sharing secrets with intimate friends was commonly highlighted as a key element of the intimate friendship. Therefore, many children allowed their intimate friends to join in their one-to-one conversations (casual chats or interviews) with me. When I euphemistically questioned the appropriateness of their friends' presence, by expressing concern over the confidentiality of our conversations, most of them refused to ask their friends to leave and proudly confirmed their friends' free access to



their private lives<sup>39</sup> (e.g., “there is no secret between us” and “he/she knows everything about me” as the children expressed it). Although this can be interpreted as children’s “display” of intimacy with friends, as will be discussed in the following section, it also suggests that “no secret” was valued as proof of “no boundary” between intimates. However, this does not mean that children never allowed friends to maintain privacy. In fact, in both the above example and other related conversations with children, children commonly asserted that they respected their intimate friends’ privacy and would never push them to share information if they did not want to. Yet, as in the above example, children found it intolerable if their intimate friends maintained privacy in front of them but gave other peers access to private information. This suggests that the way intimate friends managed the level of boundaries (absence or presence, low or high) between themselves and other peers fundamentally affected their confidence as to whether they were “special” to their valued friends. In this case, Hongyang’s behaviour failed to prove that the boundary he set between himself and intimates (Xiaoming and Dong) was lower than that between himself and non-intimates (the girls). As a result, Xiaoming and Dong doubted their special status as intimate “brothers” of Hongyang.

In addition, this example suggests the value of “reciprocity” in intimate friendship. Besides this incident, in children’s talk, helping and sharing secrets between intimates were commonly described as mutual and reciprocal behaviours. Greco and her colleagues (2015) point out that the element of reciprocity makes an important contribution to an ongoing and happiness-promoting friendship because the feeling of mutual obligation to friends can support the stability of the friendship. Brownlie (2014:139) adds that reciprocity is ‘viewed as a prerequisite for most of the friendships that people described

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<sup>39</sup> These P5 children in fact showed a high level of expectation of privacy. This expectation stemmed from concerns that their secrets might be overheard by other peers in the crowded boarding school environment. For example, some children claimed that when they were talking with their friends about certain secret or sensitive topics, some of their peers pretended to be doing things nearby, such as cleaning, but were actually eavesdropping on their conversations.

as their closest'. Therefore, it could be argued that children expect that their ways of particularising friends and lowering boundaries in intimate friendship will be reciprocally applied by their intimate friends. In this example, Hongyang's refusal to honestly and mutually share romantic secrets undermined the reciprocity in this friendship group, which gave Xiaoming and Dong a feeling of disappointment and unfairness, as further explained by them in subsequent chats with me.

Apart from serving as an illustration of the expected "particularity" and "reciprocity" in an intimate friendship, this example shows that intimacy in friendship typically makes the relationship emotionally charged, involving not only positive emotions but also negative ones, such as sorrow and anger resulting from friends' deception and betrayal (Greco et al., 2015). In the children's talk, the majority claimed that they always experienced stronger negative emotions in conflicts with intimate friends than in conflicts with other peers. The children's different levels of expectations of friendship could provide one perspective from which to explain why they might experience stronger emotions in intimate friendships. In the interviews, the majority of the children showed that they had higher expectations of their friendships with special friends than of those with other friends. For example, compared with the highlighted status of "always" when discussing help and play between intimates, most children described their expectations of non-intimate friends as "playing and having fun together sometimes" and "helping each other sometimes" (as stated by Wenhua, a P5 girl, Field note, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2016). Because of the children's high-level expectations, as Pahl and Spencer (2010) point out, 'it is commonly agreed that certain kinds of behaviour are not acceptable among certain kinds of friends' (p. 199). Thus, the children could experience stronger negative emotions when intimate friends let them down.

In sum, through discussing children's talk about the most frequently mentioned elements ("*bangzhu*" (help), "*mimi*" (secrets) and "*wan*" (playfulness and companionship)) of the intimate friendship, this section (4.2) unpacks the

commonly valued characteristics (e.g., emotional attachment, stability, trustworthiness, intimate bodily contact, play and loyal companionship) that make intimate friends “special”. Moreover, although some scholars have examined gender differences in intimate friendships (MacEvoy and Asher, 2012), the examples in this section suggest that the intimate friendship described in P5 girls’ and boys’ talk show strong similarities in terms of their valued elements (help, secret and play) and expectations of “particularity” and “reciprocity” in intimate friendship, as well as shared experiences of emotion in these friendships.

Continuing this section’s discussion about children’s expectations of “particularity” and “reciprocity” in intimate friendship, the following section will detail how children embodied these two expectations in various “displays” (Finch, 2007) of intimate friendships.

### **4.3 Displaying the intimate friendship**

This section borrows the idea of “display” from Finch’s (2007) theory of displaying families as a perspective from which to explain how children engaged in friendship displays to confirm their intimate relationships with “special” friends and to show off their intimacy in front of other surrounding peers.

To respond to the changing structure and fluidity of family identities in contemporary families, Finch (2007) develops the concept of “display”. She grounds her concept of display in David Morgan’s (1996) analysis of the importance of doing family things when people form the idea of their family. Finch (2007:66) develops her central argument that ‘families need to be “displayed” as well as “done”’. The concept of “display” is defined as:

... the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions constitute “doing family things” and thereby

confirm that these relationships are “family” relationships.  
(Finch, 2007:73)

In recent years, Finch’s concept of “display” has been well developed in family studies. Given its contribution to the understandings of family relationships, some scholars have questioned whether the term could usefully be extended to other kinds of personal relationships, such as friendship (Dermott and Seymour, 2011:17). For example, Policarpo (2016:39) discusses not only ‘practices (what friends do) but also display (what friends convey about their friendships)’ in the process of managing intimacy within friendship at a distance. In addition, in their study of intimacy in young women’s friendships, Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield (2018) describe how young women use different approaches (e.g., narrating, showing gifts and photographs) to display intimacy.

Being inspired by these studies, I wanted to also explore children’s display of intimate friendships. However, I wanted to study such display in a more “natural” context. For example, Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield (2018) only ground their analysis of display in young women’s discussions about intimate friendship in interviews. Although interview is an effective method that allows respondents to display their intimacy with significant others in their lives through narratives and behaviours (Brownlie, 2014; Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018), it does not offer enough space to involve the significant “audience” in display, and this is, in fact, an important part of Finch’s (2007) concept of “display”. This does not mean that the interview method ignores the importance of audience, because the interviewer, in fact, also plays the role of audience (Brownlie, 2014). However, the interviewer, as an outsider in relation to the personal communities examined (Pahl and Spencer, 2010), functions more as an ‘external other’ (Dermott and Seymour, 2011:14). Therefore, the interviewer cannot entirely represent the group who are the audience, and who function as the ‘observers’ in relationships (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010), nor, especially, can he/she represent the ‘internal’ others (e.g., acquaintances) in

display. Thus, having benefitted from my multiple data collection methods (see Chapter 3), in this subsection I will discuss P5 children's ways of displaying their intimate friendships, between intimates and in front of both "internal" and "external" audiences (e.g. classmates and me).

#### **4.3.1 Highlighting intimate friends' particularity**

Within a school setting, 'boundaries between friend and non-friend are often blurred' (Dermott and Seymour, 2011:18). In Central Primary School, as will be explained in Chapter 7, because of embedded sociocultural norms (e.g., the idea of "collective" (*jiti*)), sometimes boundaries were not clear between friends and other peers, especially those in the same "collective" (e.g., same working group and class) with whom they interacted closely on a daily basis. Thus, within the school setting, more overt friendship displays are needed in order to assert to an audience that 'this is my friend' (Dermott and Seymour, 2011:18).

Through combining the observed abundant "displays" of close friendships with peers during break time (Davies, 2015:49) with children's narratives, three approaches emerged as the most frequently applied ones when the children embodied their expectations of "particularity" in intimate friendships. These three main approaches are: 1) building up an exclusionary "intimate friends only" zone to keep non-intimate others outside, 2) imparting to certain objects, actions and language sentimental and specific meanings as 'tokens' of their friendship (Nayak and Kehily, 2008), and 3) giving priority to intimate friends.

In observations, it was frequently noticed that children used certain means to create an "intimate friends only" zone that excluded other peers. In some cases, such an "intimate friends only" zone was built up with a "spatial boundary". For example, to avoid being overheard or witnessed by other peers, when some children needed to talk or do important things with their intimate friends, they asked me or other close friends to stand guard around them to stop other peers from coming close. However, in most cases, the exclusionary boundary was

established by creating an unwelcoming atmosphere when other peers tried to overstep the boundary of the “intimate friends only” zone. The observed episodes surrounding Juan’s “secret birthday party” contribute to just such a picture of how children used different means (e.g., words, tones, body language and facial expressions) to create an exclusionary boundary to keep non-intimate peers outside.

When I entered the classroom, many girls chatted in groups. When Shuyue saw me, she stopped chatting with Bing, Baolin, and Yingyue and came to me to ask if I wanted to join Juan’s secret birthday party in Juan’s home. She said that only she and Bing were invited. She sounded excited and suddenly said: “Oh! I’ve just remembered one important thing about the party, I need to tell Bing.” Then she stood next to me and called Bing loudly to ask her to come over. Bing was chatting with Baolin and Yingyue in another corner of the classroom when she heard Shuyue. These girls stopped chatting and looked at her. Bing asked: “What’s up? We are telling stories.” Shuyue had a secretive smile and said: “It is very important, you know!” Then glanced at Juan’s seat. Shuyue’s secretive facial expression and tone caught Baolin’s and Yingyue’s attention and made them curious. Baolin and Yingyue asked quickly: “What?” Shuyue looked more excited and tried to hold her laughter. She shook her head as a response: “Do not ask, I will not say!” Then, she suddenly ran to Bing and whispered with two hands covering her mouth. After a few seconds, Shuyue finished talking with Bing and ran over to me. Baolin and Yingyue seemed even more curious to know what had happened because in an urgent tone they kept asking Bing what had happened. Shuyue suddenly stopped and turned around to Bing; she laughed and said loudly: “Do not tell others, it is secret!” Bing also gave a secretive smile as a response. At this time, Juan came into the classroom and asked Bing what had happened; in the same way as previously, Bing whispered to Juan and then they laughed together. (Field note, 8th April 2016)

In this scenario, when Shuyue used secretive language and behaviour, such as giving a secretive smile, shaking her head as a response, and whispering with two hands covering her mouth, to discuss Juan’s birthday plan with Bing in front of Baolin and Yingyue, she thus created an exclusionary boundary to

show that Baolin and Yingyue were not entitled to share in this confidential information. This exclusionary boundary sent Baolin and Yingyue a message that only Shuyue and Bing, as intimates, had access to this secret.

The “intimate friends only” zone not only means being eligible to gain access to confidential information; in other cases, it was closely linked to another frequently used means of friendship display: imparting sentimental and specific meanings to certain objects, actions and language as a “token” of the intimate friendship. For example, Wenhua, a P5 girl, described the action of “walking arm in arm” as a specific commitment between herself and her ex-best friend, Qinyang:

I broke up with Qinyang because I saw Qinyang walking arm in arm with Yulian on the way to the dormitory. I was extremely angry. She broke our promise. We said only us can walk arm in arm. [...] Once we have agreed that this stuff is only for each other, I would expect and trust she would keep her word for our friendship; so, when she broke the promise, I felt betrayed. (Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

As in Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield’s (2018) findings on ‘personalised codes’, unique actions (e.g., holding hands, walking arm in arm) and language (e.g., words and gestures with special meanings, and nicknames) were frequently used by most P5 children as symbols of intimate friendships. Therefore, in the above example, for Wenhua, “walking arm in arm” was a meaningful “personalised code” and a “privilege” only available to herself and Qinyang as intimates. Qinyang’s act of walking arm in arm with Yulian was thus viewed as a betrayal of Wenhua because she failed to maintain Wenhua’s particularity as an intimate friend. Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield (2018) hold that highlighting the particularity of friendship can provide a feeling of comfort in friendship by giving people the confidence that their friendship is as intimate as they expect. Therefore, a failure to preserve the particularity of an intimate friendship can challenge the friendship through undermining the pact of loyalty.

As a result, Qinyang's act of walking arm in arm with Yulian was a stimulus that ended the intimate friendship between herself and Wenhua.

Apart from these specific actions and words, meaningful objects (see also Emond, 2016), especially gifts given by friends, were mentioned even more frequently as "tokens" of the friendship. In the context of China, gift-giving, as a characteristic Chinese cultural feature (Qi, 2013:315), is commonly involved in a relationship to encourage emotional attachment. In both observations and children's narratives, exchanging gifts with intimate friends was typically included in their everyday interactions. Among these exchanged gifts, as recorded in the example below, birthday gifts were always specifically referred to when both boys and girls presented their closeness to intimate friends.

Although it was supposed to be a secret party, it seemed that almost all the children have heard about Juan's birthday party now. The reason is that Shuyue brought a photograph taken at the birthday party at Juan's home to school to show to the other children. I also saw this photograph. In the photograph, Juan, Shuyue, Bing and Juan's sister were sitting on a three-seat sofa with a birthday cake held up by Juan in the middle. Juan and Shuyue were wearing the same baseball caps. When Shuyue showed this photograph to me, Juan came with her. Juan pointed at the picture and said the cap was a birthday gift from Shuyue. Shuyue added: "It is evidence of our friendship." Juan then laughed and put her arms around Shuyue's shoulders. (Field note, 10th April 2016)

As several scholars note, on some specific occasions, such as birthdays, an intimate personal relationship, including family relationships and friendship, needs to be, or is expected to be, displayed (Finch, 2007; Pahl and Spencer, 2010; Dermott and Seymour, 2011). At these specific moments, gift-giving is a meaningful way of displaying relationships by enabling people to convey the meaning of their relationship through thoughtfully chosen gifts that show they care (Smart, 2007; Finch, 2007; Cheal, 2015). In this field note, for Shuyue and Juan, the birthday gift (matching baseball caps) was clearly 'constructed as evidence of a good relationship' (Davies, 2015:111).



Although the gifts exchanged with intimate friends both on special occasions (such as birthdays) and on an everyday basis varied among different friendship groups (including, for example, handcrafts, books, stationery, snakes, toys), reciprocity was followed as a ground rule by most P5 children. As argued by Mullis (2008), in the Chinese context, the significance of reciprocity in gift exchange is emphasized in the 'give and take of friendship' to ensure that 'each friend contributes something to the relationship and that each be benefited by that contribution' (p. 39). Among these P5 children, reciprocity was embodied in gift exchange with intimate friends through perpetuation of the ongoing circle of giving and receiving gifts. For instance, following the above example, Juan once mentioned that she was saving pocket money to buy Shuyue "good stuff" for her forthcoming birthday in return for the birthday baseball cap she received from Shuyue (Field note, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016).

That example refers to another frequently mentioned type of physical object, apart from gifts, that matters in friendship display: photographs of friends together. Photographs are an important visual symbol with which to display relationships (Finch, 2007; Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018). Photographs offer a symbolic and embodied knowledge of the people who are considered the important ones (Davies, 2015:91). Similarly, in the above example, the photograph of Shuyue and Juan wearing the same baseball cap at Juan's birthday party with another friend and Juan's family conveyed two key pieces of information. Firstly, the birthday cake shows that it was a memorable and specific moment in Juan's life. Bing and Shuyue, being introduced to Juan's family and involved in Juan's special moment, could thus be clearly seen as significant friends for Juan. Secondly, although Bing was also invited to Juan's birthday party, she was not wearing the same baseball cap as Juan and Shuyue. Therefore, wearing the same baseball caps could further emphasize the particularity of Juan and Shuyue's intimate friendship.

Apart from the most frequently mentioned gifts and photographs, other types of physical "tokens" of their intimate friendship (e.g., co-created handcrafts and

signed “pledges of friendship”) were mentioned by a small group of children. Undoubtedly, all these meaningful objects significantly represented these P5 children’s intimate friendships as display tools. However, since friendship can change over time (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011), the function of these objects was not only narrowly framed as displaying the “lived” intimate friendship; they were also used to embody the “death” of intimate friendship. Therefore, in both observations and children’s narratives, when the intimate friendship was in crisis, it was not uncommon for children to destroy the meaningful physical “tokens” of intimate friendship and ask ex-intimate friends to return the received gifts. For example, Wenjun and Xiaoyue (two P5 girls) cried when, after a quarrel, Taozi (a P5 girl) pulled apart the decorative chain they had made together, because “pulling apart the chain means we are apart” as Xiaoyue said (Interview, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Moreover, Hongyang, a P5 boy, cried when telling me that he suffered from stress after a fight with Renjie (a P5 boy) because he was not only at risk of losing a “brother” but also faced a financial crisis, as Renjie had asked him to return the “brother-only” red envelope (*hongbao*), a monetary gift, that he had received from Renjie at the latest Chinese New Year (Field note, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2016). Therefore, if these objects, to which children imparted sentimental meanings about friendship, were applied by friends as tools for “punishment” or “revenge”, they could significantly intensify the negative emotions experienced by children.

Apart from the methods of display as discussed above, giving priority to intimate friends was another strategy very frequently employed by these P5 children to highlight their intimate friends’ particularity. When studying the importance of friendship, some scholars have discussed how children tend to prioritize friendship, especially intimate friendship, over other peer relationships in their lives (e.g., Walton et al., 2002). However, few studies discuss “priority” within friendship groups. Although some studies have noticed the presence of hierarchy in these groups (Adler and Adler, 1998; George and Browne, 2000; Goodwin, 2006), the discussions are more about the power

difference experienced by children with different positions in friendship. While this research also confirms the existence of power difference in friendship groups, as will be discussed in the following chapters, I would like to add that priority in friendship groups is not only about power but also about intimacy, as it could contribute to a feeling of particularity.

Subsequent to Juan's party preparations, described above (field note, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2016), there was a conversation between Shuyue and me about the process of preparing and organizing Juan's secret party. In this narrative-based display (Finch, 2007; Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018), Shuyue repeatedly and proudly emphasized that she was *the first one* to be informed by Juan about the secret birthday party plan. This action suggested that Shuyue put great value on the sequence in which intimate friends became involved in confidential matters. But why was this sequence so highly valued by Shuyue? In fact, although Juan, Shuyue and Bing mutually nominated each other as intimate friends, according to Shuyue, Bing had joined their intimate friendship group later. Nevertheless, it seemed that Juan was spending more and more time with Bing. Thus, in many conversations with me, Shuyue disclosed her anxiety about Bing's threat to her intimate friendship with Juan. Shuyue's anxiety might have created an expectation that she needed to prove that she was closer and more special to Juan than Bing, and that the levels of intimacy between herself and Juan were higher than those between Juan and Bing. Therefore, when Juan shared her idea for a secret birthday party with Shuyue first, this made Shuyue very pleased, because being *the first one* to share Juan's secret acknowledged her priority in Juan's friendship group and her position as Juan's most special and intimate friend. This conclusion was supported in other conversations with Shuyue about other situations. For example, Shuyue frequently mentioned that Juan tended to share more private things with her than with Bing and that she was always Juan's first audience.

This positive correlation made by Shuyue between "priority" and intimacy in friendship was shared by many other children. As will be further discussed in

Chapter 6, Central Primary School constantly organizes students into groups, making grouping one of the most important processes in most school tasks. As the school administration encourages the children's participation in school life, the children's own decisions about whom to choose as group members are viewed as the most important part of the grouping process. As a result, it is noticeable that almost all children shared the idea that the most intimate friend should always be the first one chosen when forming the groups. Because of this close connection between "priority" and intimacy, in cases of friend nomination, especially in friendship groups with more than two members, the sequence in which friends were listed was carefully considered. For example, since Taozi, a P5(1) girl, would have to transfer schools after finishing P5 in Central Primary School, she bought a class memory book (*tongxuelu*) and invited all her classmates to write one page for her. This memory book was predesigned with the same questions on each page, including such items as the respondent's personal information (e.g., date of birth, contact details, nickname, favourite colour/food/song) and farewell words for Taozi. Among these predesigned questions, one was "Who are your friends?" When I viewed the children's answers, I noticed that some children used the equals sign (e.g. Duan wrote: "friends = Wenjun = Taozi") to emphasize the fact that they gave each friend the same weight (Field note, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Otherwise, the "common sense" principle that "the most special ones should always be nominated before other friends" might annoy the friends who were not nominated first.

In sum, children's displays through the use of boundaries, priority and symbols (e.g., meaningful behaviours, languages and physical objects) embody the intimacy between intimate friends by serving as acknowledgements of how special the friends are to each other. The next subsection will examine further why audience feedback and cooperation between actors mattered for the results of display.

#### **4.3.2 Important audiences and cooperation between actors in intimate friendship displays**

Although friendship display is particularly needed and expected in certain situations, for instance at times of emotional or material hardship (Dermott and Seymour, 2011), it is also conducted as an everyday practice. In this project, children's everyday friendship displays were frequently observed by other peers and by myself as important "audiences". Finch (2011) argues that 'families need to be "displayed as well as done"' (p. 202), the focus being on a process that 'individuals are conveying social meaning *to each other* as well as *to relevant others*' (p. 203, emphasis in original). Here, Finch (2011:203) highlights that the process of displaying is both directly experienced by participants within a family network, and 'experienced, observed and understood by others' outside that network. Thus, many scholars have acknowledged the important role played by the audience in display work, and argued that a positive reaction from audiences is crucial for display work to be evaluated as successful (Finch, 2007, 2011; McIntosh et al., 2011; Dermott and Seymour, 2011).

Through examining surrounding peers' reactions to different scenarios of friendship display, this project's findings argue that the audience's reaction is an important function in observed displays. For example, considering surrounding peers as significant "internal" audiences within children's school network, the question of whether they were convinced by an observed friendship display can be used to evaluate the result of the display: that is, whether its core message – "we are good friends" – has been successfully received and understood by the audience. Thus, as discussed in the previous section, to "advertise" the particularity of their friendships to everyone else, Shuyue was excited about showing off to her classmates the birthday photograph of herself and Juan wearing matching baseball caps. After observing this display of friendship, Wei, a P5 boy in Shuyue's class, commented: "So sappy!" When I asked why he made this comment, he said:

Shuyue and Juan are close, you know, so they want to have everything the same, like pens, clothes, and notebooks. It is friendship, your research topic. (Field note, 10th April 2016)

Although Wei continued to refer to this display as evidence supporting an implicitly gendered criticism of the girls being overly sentimental in their display of friendship, the undoubtable ground of this criticism was that these two girls' display successfully convinced Wei of their close friendship, as directly pointed out by Wei himself.

Furthermore, in some cases, when the message "we are intimate friends" has been successfully sent to and accepted by the audience, the audience might in turn contribute opportunities for future displays of friendship. For example, although children showed aversion to expressing negative emotions in public, as discussed in the previous section, they could not always hide such emotions from others because of the crowded boarding school context (see Chapter 3). When children comforted friends who failed to hide their distress but cried in "public" areas (e.g., classroom and playground), the provision of emotional support could be observed and understood by the audience as a display of friendship. Therefore, I sometimes observed that, when children noticed a distressed peer, they would quickly turn for help to (a) certain other peer(s), who was (were) believed to be the sad child's intimate friend(s). When I asked why they chose the particular peer(s) as the "right" one(s) to help, one common answer was that they had witnessed the provision of emotional support, play and other friend-like interactions taking place between these people. Therefore, in the process of displaying relationships, audiences might operate not only as simple observers but also as direct participants in the creation of display (Dermott and Seymour, 2011).

Although convinced audiences might contribute to the display of friendship, audiences, especially the "internal" ones who know well the display actors' everyday social lives, cannot always be easily convinced. In some cases, when the surrounding peers were not convinced by some displays, they would

question or even tease the display actors about the genuineness of the displayed intimate friendship, as in the following example:

On our way to the dormitory rooms, Jing suddenly stopped me and said: "Could you please wait for a while? I need to do a very important thing". I asked: "What kind of thing?" Jing said: "I need to go back to find Bing to ask her to come with me, she is my soulmate." Baolin looked surprised and quickly asked: "What? When did Bing become your soulmate?" Jing said: "We have always been soulmates." Yingyue asked: "Why didn't I know?" Jing did not answer and then ran back to P5 (2) classroom. After a while, Bing and Jing ran to us. When she saw Bing, Yingyue joked: "OK, your soulmate is here; shall we go now?" Bing looked confused and said: "What soulmate?" Baolin laughed and said: "Jing said you are her soulmate." Bing looked surprised and quickly turned to Jing: "Hmm? No! You are joking, right?" All the girls looked at Bing. Yingyue and Baolin tried to hold their laughter and Jing looked embarrassed. (Field note, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2016)

In this scenario, through using the word "soulmate" to describe her friendship with Bing, Jing tried to display her intimate friendship with Bing in front of me. At that moment, compared to Baolin and Yingyue, I, as an "external" audience, who was relatively new to these P5 children's school networks, was less sensitive in picking up the suspicious aspect of the display. Baolin's and Yingyue's reactions of doubt to Jing's nomination of Bing as her soulmate can suggest one possibility: namely, that after the long time they had spent together in school, Baolin and Yingyue, as "internal" audiences, felt confused because they had not seen any clues in their daily interactions to make them believe that Bing was in fact Jing's soulmate.

Jing's display failed not only to convince the important "internal" audiences but also to gain positive cooperation from Bing, who was supposed to be her display partner. As an "external" audience, although Baolin's and Yingyue's reaction made me start to doubt the truthfulness of Jing's display, I still have certain reservations. One reason was that Baolin's and Yingyue's reaction might also be read as an act of vying with each other within friendship groups

(George and Brown, 2000). However, Bing's negative response to Jing's nomination of her as soulmate was the strongest evidence in support of Baolin and Yingyue's doubts, and confirmed my own scepticism about Jing's display.

Comparison of the above scenarios of display (Shuyue and Juan vs. Jing and Bing) suggests that positive cooperation between the display actors is crucial if display is to be convincing and successful. In some cases, display is not a "monodrama" but needs interaction and cooperation between the involved "actors". In the above case of Shuyue and Juan, their positive cooperation made their displays convincing. For example, in the scenario presented on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2016, when Shuyue mentioned the baseball cap as evidence of their friendship, Juan's reaction of laughing and putting her arms around Shuyue's shoulders could be viewed as positive cooperation. By contrast, in the conversation between Bing and Jing, rather than give a positive response, Bing used an uncompromising answer ("No! You are joking, right?") to reject Jing's identification of her as a soulmate. Therefore, besides the lack of a positive reaction from the audience, the lack of positive cooperation between display actors as well resulted in a display of intimate friendship being unconvincing.

Besides the example of Jing's display, some children experienced similar unsuccessful displays of intimate friendship. In these unsuccessful display scenarios, being questioned or even teased by the surrounding audience about the genuineness of the displayed intimate friendship always upset children. For example, after the last-mentioned scenario, Jing cried. In a follow-up conversation with Jing after I comforted her, Jing complained that Bing's reaction of not giving her "face" (*bugei mianzi*) made her seem foolish and mawkish in front of other people so that she got teased. Therefore, one of the factors that upset her was a feeling of losing "face" (*mianzi*) in front of Baolin,



Yingyue and me<sup>40</sup>. Jing's explanation of losing "face" was not only mentioned by many other P5 children who had had negative experiences of friendship display, but was also noticed by other scholars. Herrmann-Pillath (2010:338) argues that, in the China context, displaying relationships (*guanxi*) in front of observers has an even more crucial influence on the preservation of the relationship because of the notion of "face". Since "face" is closely linked with decency, dignity and public reputation<sup>41</sup> (Schoenhals, 2016), a failed display of friendship not only challenges children's confidence in the relationship but also causes shame or loss of "face" in front of the observer (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010).

In sum, following the above subsection's discussion of children's multiple and reciprocal means of displaying their intimate friendships, this subsection argues that displays of intimate friendship can to some extent be understood as a "show". This means that a successful display not only requires positive cooperation between display actors but also needs a positive response from the surrounding audiences to prove that they have been convinced that the friendship between these actors was as intimate as it was purported to be.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed what children said about their intimate friendships with "special" friends and what they did to display such intimate friendships in their everyday school lives. Through discussing the three most frequently mentioned elements – "*bangzhu*" (help), "*mimi*" (secrets) and "*wan*" (playfulness and companionship) – in children's talk about their intimate friendships, the chapter argues that for these P5 children, "intimate friendship" is characterized as a mutually nominated (Sharabany et al., 1981),

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<sup>40</sup> This scenario will be referred to again in Chapter 6 as a valued example in the discussion of the risks (e.g., emotional stress) caused by the power imbalance in instrumental friendships between "achieved" children and "less-achieved" children.

<sup>41</sup> "Face" has a rich meaning in the Chinese context. In Chapter 6 and 7, the idea of "face" will be discussed again with reference to different meanings: that of authority (Schoenhals, 2016) and friendly cooperation.

multistranded (Pahl and Spencer, 2004), and emotionally charged (Greco et al., 2015) relationship between friends, incorporating high levels of intimacy (Jamieson, 2005; Morgan, 2011) and expectation (Pahl and Spencer, 2010).

Although some of its characteristics (e.g., openness, trust, loyalty and reciprocity) have been commonly noticed in other studies about children's "best" friendship, certain aspects of "intimate friendship" were highlighted by these P5 children as contextualized choices (Chen et al., 2004) to negotiate within the context of a rural Chinese boarding school. For the P5 children, two of the characteristics of such a context are: a lack of timely and high-quality family support during the extensive period at school (Hansen, 2015), and a blurred boundary between friends and other peers (Dermott and Seymour, 2011). The latter is further strengthened by the embedded Chinese collective idea of the "collective" in the school setting (see Chapter 7). Therefore, these P5 children particularly emphasized the importance of the "emotional support" (Brownlie, 2014) offered by intimate friends, who were always physically there for them, and valued the "particularity" (e.g., privilege and priority) enjoyed only by intimate friends.

To further understand what children did to confirm and show off the "particularity" of special friends in front of others in everyday school interactions, this chapter borrows the idea of "display" from Finch (2007). It discusses the three approaches applied most frequently by these P5 children to embody such "particularity": 1) highlighting that the boundary of access to privacy between intimates is nonexistent or at least lower than the boundary between intimates and outsiders (Jamieson, 2005); 2) creating a range of "intimate friends only" actions, words and objects as "tokens" (Nayak and Kehily, 2008) and "symbols" (Letchfield and Hafford-Letchfield, 2018) of intimate friendship; and 3) giving intimate friends priority in their school lives. As the intimate relationship that children engaged in represented long periods of time (Bukowski et al., 1998) and strong affection, they always expected reciprocity from their intimate friends. Therefore, in both narratives and observations,

reciprocity was valued as a ground rule for maintaining an intimate friendship. For example, in everyday friendship display, preserving the ongoing “give and take” circle of gift exchange (Mullis, 2008) was a rule followed by intimates. Once reciprocity was missing, not only in gift exchange but also in other situations, such as secrets exchange and boundary management, intimate friendships would be threatened.

In the case of display, which is a friendship “show” performed by intimates as “actors” and others as the “audience”, positive cooperation between display “actors” and positive feedback from convinced “audiences” are crucial elements of success. Otherwise, the truth of the displayed intimate friendship might be doubted. In successful displays of intimate friendship, the feeling of intimacy between friends and the act of displaying such intimacy can show a circular relationship. Specifically, the feeling of intimacy encourages intimates to employ approaches that highlight their intimate friends’ “particularity” in display work. In return, successful displays further increase intimates’ confidence in their friendship and simultaneously contribute to the development of intimacy in the friendship. In contrast, a failed display is likely to cause the display actor(s) an embarrassing experience of losing “face” (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010; Schoenhals, 2016).

In addition, involving the idea of “display” not only adds a perspective from which to further understand these P5 children’s intimate friendships but also illuminates other types of friendship between children. For example, the surrounding peers’ reactions to displays were useful in helping me to evaluate whether the friendships between the observed children were as intimate or even as “real” as portrayed in their narratives. After the scenario of Jing’s unsuccessful display, I reflected on why the degrees of intimacy between Jing and Bing that I had heard about in conversations with Jing differed from those observed in this scenario. Such unmatched data and subsequent reflections and investigations significantly contributed to my findings that children would sometimes refer to certain peers as friends, or even as intimate friends, and

engage in close interactions with them in certain situations for instrumental or other reasons (e.g., “instrumental friendship” in Chapter 6 and “collective-oriented friendship” in Chapter 7).

By reviewing the list of names of mutually nominated intimate friends, as collected from both children’s narratives and observations, it seems that all these P5 children and their intimate friends shared the same gender identity. According to this chapter’s discussion about the importance of “time” in intimate friendship, one potential explanation for this phenomenon could be that because children have more opportunities to spend time with same gender peers than with opposite gender peers in school time (e.g., gendered dormitory room arrangements and gendered course plan<sup>42</sup>), they therefore have more opportunities to develop an intimate friendship with same gender peers. This reasoning is supported, to some extent, by the children’s nominations of intimate friends, given that many of them are from the same dormitory rooms or working groups<sup>43</sup>. However, this is not the only explanation. In Hansen’s (2015:51) findings about children’s school lives in two rural boarding schools, she notes that the school’s strict rules regarding student behaviour includes a code forbidding intimate relationships between boys and girls. This rule was also found to be enforced in Central Primary School. Therefore, the following chapter will discuss these P5 children’s friendship experiences in the context of “gender segregation” in school. It will particularly unpack how girls used their intimate friendships with same gender friends in heterosexual romantic adventure.

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<sup>42</sup> In Central Primary School, some courses, such as PE, and clubs, such as dance club and sports club, separate boys and girls in class time.

<sup>43</sup> Chapter 7 argues that school’s organizing systems (e.g., group-based working model) and the ideas of “collective” (*jiti*) and “in-group members” (*zijiren*) increase the possibility that children will befriend other “in-group members” from a same “collective”, such as class, working groups and dormitory rooms.

## **Chapter 5 Gender separation, heterosexuality and same-gender intimate friends in children's heterosexual romantic adventures in school**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The influences of gender and heterosexuality on children's and young people's experiences of dealing with relationships with same-gender and opposite-gender peers have been widely discussed in various contexts (Thorne, 1993; Renold, 2005; Mellor, 2006; Evans, 2007; McCormack, 2014; Mulholland, 2015; Moore and Reynolds, 2018). There is a common argument that same-gender peers play a significant role in children's learning and practice of romance and heterosexual relationships (e.g., Thorne and Luria, 1986; Walton et al., 2002). For example, among same-gender peers, same-gender intimate friends are always understood as a source of support and comfort during children's romantic adventures (Walton et al., 2002). However, the relationship between experiences of heterosexual romance and same-gender intimate friendship is complex: same-gender intimate friends can influence romantic relationships, but simultaneously romantic experiences also influence the quality of the friendship (Flynn et al., 2017). For instance, when same-gender intimate friends are romantically interested in the same person, their friendship might be threatened (Walton et al., 2002). Children might also feel tension between their wish to spend time with same-gender intimate friends and their wish to be with romantic partners (Giordano et al., 2006). Therefore, this chapter places a discussion about same-gender intimate friends' roles in children's heterosexual romantic adventures in a Chinese school setting.

Since the surrounding sociocultural context has a deep influence on children's ways of learning, understanding and experiencing (James, 1993), to unpack

same-gender intimate friends' role in children's daily heterosexual romantic adventures, this chapter starts with a discussion of the sociocultural norms that govern these school-aged rural Chinese children's understandings of 'the right and wrong ways of doing girls or boys and girlfriend-boyfriend' (Mellor, 2006:131). Through this section, the chapter seeks to point out the difficulties faced by children in heterosexual romantic adventures. Sequentially, it discusses how children's same-gender intimate friends protect children from unwanted suitors and encourage their opportunities to interact (e.g., play) with the opposite-gender peers that they like. Then, at the end, the chapter turns around to discuss the influence of heterosexual romance on children's intimate friendship with same-gender friends (e.g., the tension experienced by children when seeking balance between friendship and romance).

Before moving on to a detailed discussion, it is necessary to first clarify two points regarding the data used in this chapter. Firstly, in the field, I did not observe LGBTQ<sup>44</sup> groups. Therefore, this chapter employs a binary girl-boy division and discusses heterosexual romance in childhood. Secondly, as will be presented in the following paragraphs, due to the school environment, discussing one's own romance was risky and "inappropriate" in public places, such as classrooms. Thus, dormitory rooms were the significant space for children's conversation about romance. Being a female researcher, I had no access to the boys' dormitory rooms, with the result that girls are more prominent than boys in my data, as reflected upon in Chapter 3. Consequently,

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<sup>44</sup> This missing data about LGBTQ groups in my fieldwork might be attributed to the following factors. As argued by some scholars (Kustatscher, 2015; Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016), the gender binary of male-female (and heterosexual gender relations) are still dominant social discourses in school settings. These dominant discourses were also observed in my fieldwork as it emerged in both children's and teachers' speech and acts. Moreover, in the Chinese school context, the majority of children and staff hold conservative attitudes towards LGBTQ (UNFPA, 2018). This can be a result of the conservative attitude on this issue in the Chinese context (e.g., in media) (UNDP, 2014). As a result, LGBTQ was not an easily-accessed topic at school. Furthermore, considering the limitations of time and sample in an ethnographic study, I did not observe LGBTQ groups in my fieldwork.

in this chapter, especially in section 5.3, data were collected more from the perspective of the girls than from that of the boys.

## **5.2 “Liking<sup>45</sup>” between boys and girls: normal or abnormal?**

Gender separation is commonly argued as the gender rule central to children’s peer culture at school (Thorne and Luria, 1986; Thorne, 1993; Renold, 2005; Bhana et al., 2011; Delamont, 2012). This gender rule has been observed in Chinese school settings for a long time. Having talked with Chinese women, born from the 1950s to the 1980s, about their memories of gender relationships during schooling in their childhood, Evans (2007) points out that gender separation was customary in Chinese schools, starting at primary school. The gender separation, as described by Evans’s (2007) interviewees, was such that girls ‘did not often speak to boys’ (p. 137) and ‘girls and boys had to enter the classroom in different groups, and they sat at separate tables’ (p. 148). Although the gender separation observed in my fieldwork was not as strict as in Evans’s study, the idea that ‘girls and boys are different, and should be separated’ (as stated by Wenjun, a P5 girl, Field note, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016) was still prominent among these P5 children at Central Primary School. For example, “boy” and “girl” are two ubiquitous terms in all P5 children’s talk about their everyday school lives. It was very common to notice the embedded message of gender separation from the use of “we”/“our” and “they”/“these” in children’s talk (e.g., ‘we are/our girls (boys) are...’, ‘they are/these boys (girls) are...’). Moreover, although playing games with opposite-gender peers in the neighbourhood at weekends and holidays was frequently mentioned in children’s narratives of their after-school entertainments, at school, children always paid careful attention to the gender boundary, especially physical distance, when interacting with opposite-gender peers.

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<sup>45</sup> In this chapter, the term liking (*xihuan*) refers to a heterosexual romantic feeling between a boy and a girl.

According to conversations with most P5 children, “romance gossip” and negative judgements by peers and teachers who are continuously ‘witnessing’ (Thorne, 1993:52-53) were the most significant factors keeping children away from opposite-gender peers. Therefore, this section explores why being involved in “romance gossip” is commonly complained about by children, who say that it is ‘very annoying and causes trouble’ (said by Wenhua, a P5 girl, Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

### **5.2.1 Romance gossip, heterosexual teasing and children’s excitement in heterosexual romantic relationships**

In the field, ‘boys play with boys, girls play with girls’ was a common declaration in children’s talk. In the early stage of the fieldwork, when I asked questions about cross-gender relationships and interactions, most children were not inclined to respond and frequently showed their avoidance of opposite-gender peers with comments such as ‘I do not play with boys (girls),’ ‘I do not care about boys (girls),’ and ‘I do not pay attention to what boys (girls) do’<sup>46</sup>. However, I was initially confused by my contradictory findings that the interactions between boys and girls in observations were not as distant as in children’s speech. As will be discussed in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, because of Central Primary School’s group-based work model for school tasks, children always needed to cooperate with other opposite-gender groupmates to carry out these group tasks. Yet, in comparison with the observed interactions among same-gender children, two characteristics of the observed cross-gender interactions indeed indicate children’s carefulness in interactions with opposite-gender peers. Firstly, the majority of cross-gender interactions took place due to compulsory requirements for group-based school tasks. In these situations, children could not freely choose those with whom they interacted

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<sup>46</sup> As argued in reflexivity in Chapter 3, building rapport and clarifying the “least adult” identity took time. Therefore, compared with the vivid data about heterosexual romance that I collected later, I interpreted children’s resistance to discussing such issues with me in the early stage of my fieldwork as a result of an underdeveloped rapport and unconvincing “least adult” role as an “older sister”.



but had to cooperate with group members of the same or different gender. Secondly, when interacting with opposite-gender peers, most children preferred to be with a group of same-gender peers as companions; if they had to be alone, they preferred to interact with a group of opposite-gender peers rather than with a single opposite-gender peer. In sum, most children tried to avoid interactions, especially individual-to-individual interactions, with opposite-gender peers without a “reasonable excuse” (e.g., group-based school work) on public occasions.

One key motive for these children’s “carefulness” in cross-gender interactions at school was to avoid becoming the target of surrounding peers’ heterosexual teasing. In these P5 children’s talk about the everyday problems they were struggling with in school, gossipy (*bagua*) peers and romance gossip (*zaoyao*) were prominent examples. The term “romance gossip” was used by children to refer to peers’ behaviour of producing and spreading a rumour that there was heterosexual romantic feeling (“liking”) or a relationship between a boy and a girl. Although such romance gossip could be true in some cases, most children complained that, in most cases, it was not true but was produced by ‘bored and gossipy peers to tease and annoy others’, as stated by Bao, a P5 boy (Interview, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2016). Of the different conversations with more than half of the P5 children about being teased with romance gossip at school, one conversation on the topic with Wenhua, a P5 girl, in the hallway outside the girls’ dormitory rooms, provides a commonly shared and particularly detailed picture of how easily romance gossip can arise:

Wenhua: Boys and girls should be separated in school because if a girl pays more attention to a boy for one minute, the surrounding people will say: ‘Are you guys in a relationship?’ or something like this. But we are not! It is very annoying and causes trouble.

Me: Why do you think the gossip happens so quickly, like after one minute?

Wenhua: Because many people are bored, they have nothing else to do but look around to see who is with whom. And when a boy and a girl are together, like standing close or chatting, or reading together, or laughing together and, some other things, anyway, they look happy to be with each other, this obviously catches people's attention. The bored people would quickly notice them and start gossiping and spreading gossip to attract other people's attention. Anyway, they know people are all very gossipy. (Field note, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2016)

In studies based in western countries, it is commonly agreed that cross-gender interactions at school are almost always heterosexualized (Thorne and Luria, 1986; Thorne, 1993; Renold, 2005; Mellor, 2006; Bhana, 2016). Between boys and girls, their relationships are likely to be referred to as “crushes” rather than “friendships” and their everyday interactions are always assumed to stem from heterosexual attraction (Thorne and Luria, 1986). For example, even borrowing a pen from an opposite-gender peer can be construed as having sexual overtones and meanings (Davies, 2003). Similarly, in schooling in both urban and rural areas of China, interactions between boys and girls easily led to heterosexual teasing (Liu, 2006; Evans, 2007). Like the examples given by Wenhua in the above conversation, once the interactions between an individual girl and an individual boy convey a close spatial distance (e.g., ‘standing close’ and ‘reading together’) and joyful automorphy (e.g., ‘laughing together’ and ‘looking happy’), they would easily become an attention-getting subject of romance gossip.

Commonly, heterosexual gossip and teasing are understood as ‘a powerful mechanism of social control’ (McDonald et al., 2007:384) applied by children to police the gender boundary (Thorne, 1993; Myers and Raymond, 2010; Bhana, 2016). This project's findings support this argument. However, it adds that, in comparison with other types of gender teasing (e.g., boys mimicking and mocking crying girls to make fun of girls' sentimentality; girls naming boys as “smelly boys” when teasing them by complaining that their smelly clothes and shoes stink up their dancing room), teasing peers with romance gossip

also suggests children's considerable curiosity and excitement about heterosexual romantic feelings and relationships.

In the field, children's expressions of such curiosity and excitement were frequently noticed but in different and even ambivalent ways on private and public occasions. For example, after establishing a strong rapport with children, in private conversations with me (e.g., one-to-one chats, interviews and the "diary programme"), heterosexual romantic feeling and relationships were very prevalent among topics raised by children. Many girls and a small number of boys asked me questions such as 'Why do boys and girls like each other?', 'Is it wrong that boys and girls like each other?' and 'Can boys and girls like each other?'. Although these children could be shy when discussing such topics, most of them honestly disclosed the relevant feelings and experiences (e.g., who they liked and who liked them) that made them excited, curious and even confused, and asked for my opinions with a respectful and serious attitude.

However, in public spaces, such as classrooms, hallways and playgrounds, "liking" between boys and girls turned out to be a topic that was only raised in the teasing context and was likely to cause chaos. Once an incident taking place around them suggested evidence of a heterosexual romantic attraction between boys and girls, such as a girl expressing her affection to a boy, or a boy found writing a "love letter" or sending meaningful gifts (e.g., bracelet and necklace) to a girl, most children would be quickly attracted, would become excited, and then start teasing (e.g., loud laugh, giggles, dramatic voice, excited facial expression, and jeering). Furthermore, most children tended to hide and deny their own curiosity and desire for romance and heterosexual relationships on public occasions. For example, even the children, who were open and engaged when discussing aspects of heterosexual romance in private conversations with me, seemed shocked and "offended" if I touched on such a topic in public spaces with other peers around. An episode that took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2016 in Central Primary School's playground was the most typical example of children's common reactions to discussions about

“liking” between boys and girls on public occasions. It was a data-intensive episode involving the largest number of boys and girls from both P5(1) and P5(2) discussing the topic.

On 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016, after the morning gymnastics exercise, I noticed a disturbance amongst children – some P5 boys were teasing Xiang, a P5(2) boy, in the playground, saying that he liked Cai, a P5(2) girl. The boys claimed that, when they were doing the morning gymnastics exercise, Xiang kept staring at Cai. Xiang looked embarrassed. He chased and tussled with these boys, telling them to stop spreading this romance gossip. While I was standing with many of the excited P5(2) children watching the boys’ chaotic rough-and-tumble, I asked them: ‘What would you do if an opposite-gender peer liked you?’ When they heard my question, most of the children seemed shocked:

Jing (girl) stomped and used her hands to cover her ears and shouted with a shrill: ‘How can you ask this question?!’ Juan (girl) nodded her head to show that she agreed with Jing and added: ‘You cannot ask! You cannot ask this question!’ Wei (boy) said: ‘This is a question for grown-ups. How can you ask now?’ Jieyu (girl) answered: ‘It will depend on whether he has a child’s mind or an adult’s mind; if his liking was an adult one, I would reject it.’ (Field note, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

After the morning gymnastics exercise, P5(1)’s PE class took place. When the children were allowed out for free play, some children ran over to me and asked: ‘I heard from P5(2) people that you asked them what we would do if we knew someone liked us?’ I said ‘Yes’ and asked them what they thought about this question. These P5(1) children showed similar reactions to children from P5(2):

Ling (girl) looked shy and said: ‘I do not know. I never think about this. This is not what a child should think about.’ Yun (boy) said: ‘Children should not like other people because the law says we could only have a relationship when we are over 18 years old.’ Xiaoming (boy) agreed with Yun, saying: ‘Yes, if you were with someone now and you were noticed by the teachers, you would be in serious trouble.’ I asked: ‘How

serious?’ Xiaoming explained: ‘I do not know. I heard that a couple in Primary Year 6 were caught by the teachers when they were with each other, they kissed.’ [When he said ‘kiss’, Xiaoming made a scared and shy face]. ‘Maybe, the worst thing would be being expelled from the school.’ (Field note, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

This vivid episode gives a clear picture of how children used different means (e.g., words and body language) to protest that my question was for grown-ups and inappropriate for children. In addition, although Jieyu’s comment that she would decide on her attitude based on whether this boy’s “liking” was with a “child’s mind” or an “adult’s mind” suggests that there might be a type of acceptable “liking” and a type of unacceptable “liking”, children’s common resistance to the topic made it evident that when talking about “liking” between boys and girls most children’s instinct would be to understand the “liking” as the unacceptable “liking” with an “adult’s mind”.

Jieyue’s distinction between acceptable “liking” with a “child’s mind” and unacceptable “liking” with “an adult’s mind” was commonly shared by other P5 children but with different ways of phrasing it (e.g., “pure (*chunjie*) mind” vs. “unhealthy (*bujiankang*) mind” and “normal (*zhengchang*) mind” vs. “abnormal (*biantai*) mind”). In fact, as agreed by most P5 children, the most annoying and worrying part of being involved in romance gossip was that it could undermine their highly-valued public reputation at school (Schoenhals, 2016). For example, as claimed by Qian (a P5 girl), ‘it [romance gossip] might make other people think I have an unhealthy/abnormal (*bujiankang/biantai*) mind’ (Field note, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 2016). Therefore, the following subsection will explore the elements that can characterize “liking” between a boy and a girl as an unhealthy and abnormal “liking” with an “adult’s mind”.

### **5.2.2 The “fine line” between the acceptable and the unacceptable “liking” between boys and girls**

When children explained further how romance gossip stigmatizes them as having an “unhealthy/abnormal” mind, their most prominent complaint was that

some peers liked to add some fake information to the romance gossip to suggest a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship that included physical intimacy (e.g., kissing, holding hands, hugging or even having sex). In children's talk, there was a clear link between the unacceptable "liking" and *doing* something to put into practice an interest in opposite-gender peers<sup>47</sup>, particularly building boyfriend-girlfriend relationships and involvement of physical intimacy. For instance, in the previously mentioned episode of the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2016, Yun (a P5 boy) said 'The law says we could only have a relationship when we are over 18 years old'. Xiaoming (a P5 boy) explained the serious consequences of attempting physical intimacy in heterosexual relationships by suggesting that a P6 couple might be expelled from the school if teachers caught them kissing. Moreover, on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2016, in the P5 girls' dormitory room, a group of P5 girls' complaints about a P5 boy called Ouyang<sup>48</sup>'s inappropriate behaviour of "liking" girls with an "adult's mind" made this link even clearer.

Wang said: 'Ouyang always pursues girls, we think his heart is not like children, he's precocious.' Qian and Hong agreed. Qian said: 'Yes, his mind is unhealthy.' Hong added: 'He is very gross; he is not only attracted to girls but also wants to touch and hug girls!' (When she said: 'touch girls', Hong used her arms to hold her shoulders and shake her body). Zhang added: 'Not only touch! They said Ouyang also wants to kiss girls! He is a rogue (*liu mang*).' Duan said: 'Yes, the teachers have asked him to the office to have a serious talk about his bad behaviour to stop him. The teachers told us that it is normal to feel that you like an opposite-gender peer, but it is unhealthy and unacceptable if you do something about this. Since we are young children, we need to bury this feeling deep inside our hearts and wait until we are 18 years old, then we can pursue the ones we like.' Ru: 'Yes, because we are not yet 18 years old now. So, now, we can like people, but it's the

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<sup>47</sup> In this chapter, in the phrases of 'practices of heterosexuality/heterosexual liking' among P5 children, the "practices" refer to children's behaviours of expressing and performing their interest in opposite-gender peers: for example, pursuing and expressing their affection to them (e.g., sending love letters/gifts; asking to build a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship).

<sup>48</sup> Ouyang features a lot in this chapter. However, this was not because Ouyang was the only boy who pursued girls. In the field, I heard of or witnessed at least seven boys' various ways of pursuing girls. However, only Ouyang's pursuit lasted through the entire fieldwork, which means that I gained more opportunities to collect abundant data by continuously observing and following up related episodes.

liking among friends, not between men and women.’ (When Ru said ‘between men and women’, she made the gesture of holding her hands together and quickly tapped her thumbs together). (Field note, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

This example clearly summarizes the “regulation” of understanding and dealing with “liking” between boys and girls followed by most P5 children. The rule was: the feeling of liking opposite-gender peers is ‘normal’, but it is ‘unhealthy’ and ‘unacceptable’ for children to *do* anything to put this feeling into practice. This suggests that, in the Chinese context, although the feeling of interest in opposite-gender peers in puberty is emphasized as ‘natural’, ‘the need for self-control (*zikong*)’ is also stressed (Bakken, 2000:364). Therefore, burying the feeling of “liking” inside hearts and ‘purifying’ the heterosexual “liking” as “liking” between friends were given as examples by Duan and Ru as appropriate ways of dealing with their own interest in opposite-gender peers. Performing the desirability of heterosexual relationships with less self-control was inappropriate.

In this example, girls particularly used both narrative and a specific gesture to characterize the heterosexual relationship involving physical intimacy (e.g., touching, hugging and kissing) as “liking” with an “adult’s mind”. The gesture of holding her hands together and quickly tapping her thumbs together was used not only by Ru but also by other P5 children. In one class, when the teacher gave some examples of Chinese traditional wedding customs – the groom being required to carry the bride (*bei xinni*), and rough heterosexual horseplay (*nao dongfang*) taking place in the bridal chamber – some boys gave each other cheeky smiles and made the gesture behind the teacher (Field note, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2016). Therefore, among these P5 children, this gesture was developed as a strong and clear euphemism for the physical intimacy and sexual contact in adults’ heterosexual romantic relationships.

In addition, in this example, girls, like Yun in the episode of the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 2016, repeatedly pointed to the age of 18 as an important landmark that

clarified why they were too young to be eligible for heterosexual romantic relationships. Considering girls' emphasis during these conversations on characterizing physical intimacy as an "adult only" element in heterosexual romantic relationships, it might be argued that when children highlighted the age limit on engaging in these relationships, they might actually be referring to the physical intimacy involved as something "forbidden" in the children's world (Reeder, 2000). Therefore, Ouyang's actions ('wants to touch and hug girls') were criticized by girls both as examples of lack of self-control (Bakken, 2000) and as precocious behaviour transgressing the red line between children and adults, and breaking the taboo on heterosexual physical intimacy among children.

The above episodes not only help us to understand children's hatred of romance gossip and their carefulness in cross-gender interaction, but also suggest that teachers' influence on children's construction of the right and wrong ways of managing heterosexual relationships (Mellor, 2006) was significant. In the above episodes, teachers were frequently quoted by children with strong reference to their knowledge of "liking" between boys and girls, and in addition were viewed as patrolling the school environment to "catch" children who put their "liking" into "inappropriate" practices. Therefore, when engaging in conversations or interactions related to heterosexual romance, children always tried to hide from teachers. For example, as my rapport with the children continuously developed, they started to share with me their understandings and experiences of "liking" between boys and girls in greater detail. However, on many occasions, children tended to double-check my 'identity' as a 'girl' or a 'teacher' (Epstein, 1998), before disclosing their heterosexual romance. They would emphasize my relationship to them as being that of an "older sister" (*jiejie*) who was on their side, rather than a watchful adult who would report them to the teachers. In such a process of identity checking, they would often say: '*Jiejie*, do not tell our teachers, or we will be in trouble.' This sentence could well indicate that children's concern



over their teachers' discouraging attitudes towards "liking" between boys and girls was a key factor in significantly restricting children's talk and practice of heterosexual romance on public occasions at school. Therefore, the following paragraphs will shift the chapter's focus towards understanding "liking" between boys and girls from the teachers' perspective.

As discussed in Chapter 3, since one of my work desks was placed in the P5-6 teachers' office, I gained abundant opportunities to engage in teachers' everyday chats<sup>49</sup>. In these chats, the commonly shared attitude to "liking" between boys and girls was: the feeling of interest in opposite-gender peers is normal, but "*zaolian*" ("premature love") is not allowed. This attitude was also frequently conveyed to children. In one lesson about dealing with relationships with classmates, the teacher teaching the course Morality and Society<sup>50</sup> (*pinde yu shehui*) said:

It is normal and ok that you feel you like an opposite-gender peer, but boys and girls must have a sense of propriety when interacting. Do not cross the red line by doing things that children should not do. (Field note, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2016)

In the teacher's next talk, "premature love" was referenced as an example of 'things that children should not do'. "Premature love" was a term frequently used by children, teachers and parents to refer to 'courtship or dating among young people in elementary and secondary school systems' (Shen, 2015:86). For teachers, the main concern was that "premature love" brings with it the risk of pre-marital sexual behaviour and could undermine the students' academic

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<sup>49</sup> Consent to record observations in the office was confirmed with teachers in the P5/P6 teachers' office when I moved into the office. Moreover, when I wanted to quote certain teachers' comments about certain topics in my fieldnotes, I always orally double-checked for permission.

<sup>50</sup> Sex education is less developed in Chinese schooling (Liu and Su, 2014, UNFPA, 2018). In Central Primary School, there was no stand-alone sex education course. The only course referring to heterosexual relationships was Morality and Society, with a focus on 'abstinence, "good" morals and "appropriate" gender roles' (Jeffreys and Yu, 2015:45). For example, in such a course and its course textbook, as noticed by Bakken (2000:364), 'pure friendship' was always used to describe 'healthy' relationships with opposite-gender classmates.

progress. One teacher outlined her concerns regarding “premature love” in a chat with me, as follows:

Premature love has a bad influence on studying. Everyone has limited time and energy every day. If the time and energy is spent on premature love, where can you get the time and energy for studying? Without good academic performance, how can you gain access to a good university and a good job? Also, if the girls do the things that should not be done when they are in a relationship, and do not protect themselves properly, and get pregnant, their futures will be destroyed. (Field note, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016)

In this chat, this teacher firstly pointed out the “bad influence on study” in that “premature love” costs time and energy. In the Chinese context, when educating school-aged children, academic competence is given the greatest importance by teachers and parents as characterizing what a “good child” and “good student” should be (Xu et al., 2006). Therefore, as noted by Liu (2006:429), ‘parents and teachers tend to become concerned that interest in the opposite sex may divert the child’s attention from school work’. This concern is deeply rooted in the Chinese school’s academic-performance oriented evaluation system. As discussed in Chapter 2, examination-oriented education is still the mainstream education model in the rural area of China (Wang, 2013) because it is understood as the most effective or even ‘the only real way’ for rural children to escape their forebears’ identities as rural people (Dello-Iacovo, 2009:246). For example, when teachers criticized children who gained low marks in schoolwork or exams, good academic performance was frequently highlighted as the children’s ‘best approach of changing fates and moving from villages to cities for decent lives’ (as stated by a class teacher, Field note, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2016), especially for children from “ordinary” families without wealth and political power. Moreover, a good academic performance is constructed as a child’s obligation to his/her family (see Chapter 7). Therefore, ‘study is students’ most important task and duty at school’ and ‘good students should not allow other things to influence their study’ were beliefs commonly expressed by children, teachers and parents in the field. In such a

context, “premature love”, as something that costs study time and energy, was not allowed.

In addition, in this example, the most serious risk posed by “premature love” was sexual behaviour, particularly its negative consequence to girls (that is, pregnancy). In fact, both in conversations with other teachers and in daily observations, physical intimacy between boys and girls was labelled taboo by teachers. This taboo is maintained not only to police the line between adults and children in heterosexual relationships (Renold, 2005; Mellor, 2006; Mellor and Epstein, 2006) but also to defend Chinese traditional sexual and moral norms (Liu, 2006; Shen, 2015). Children’s sexuality is always a sensitive topic among adults because of the assumption of children’s innocence (e.g. Mellor, 2006; Mellor and Epstein, 2006). One traditional way of arguing why children’s practices of sexuality are difficult for adults to accept is that children are always viewed as ‘sexual becomings’ rather than as ‘sexual beings’, whose practices of sexuality are explained as just ‘playing at, practicing, trying on or mimicking’ older people’s sexualities (Renold, 2005:37). Thus, when children’s practices of sexuality (e.g., physical intimacy) look less like play and more like something serious, adult anxieties may arise because of the feeling that the lines between adult and child are becoming blurred (Renold, 2005:37).

Moreover, in the Chinese context, some traditional sexual and moral norms, such as “*nannu shoushou buqin*” (males and females should not interact directly and intimately), have been internalized (Liu, 2006) to strictly govern the contact and distance between males and females (Shen, 2015). Therefore, it is argued in other China-based studies about sex and sexuality that “premature love” is labelled dangerous and a social problem because it might result in premarital sex, a behaviour that offends Chinese civilized sexual morality (Farrer, 2006; Shen, 2015). However, it might be because men’s privileged gender status still exists (Evans, 2007), that such sexual morality in China still carries the traditional gender expectation of female chastity (Farrer, 2006; Evans, 2007; Liu, 2015b), representing ‘a singular focus on the female

body as the locus of normative standards of sexual and moral conduct' (Evans, 2007:159). Obedience to such female-focused moral expectations in heterosexual relationships can also be noticed amongst girls in Central School A. For example, in comparison to boys, girls seemed to follow the norm "*nannu shoushou buqin*" more strictly in cross-gender interactions. In some observations, girls used "*nannu shoushou buqin*" to explain their behaviour of using materials to create a physical boundary between themselves and boys in interaction. An example is rolling one textbook into a tube, then placing the 'tube' between their mouths and the boys' ears when they need to say something privately. Some boys' scream of "*nannu shoushou buqin*" can also effectively push girls away when girl student leaders try to pull them back into the classroom to finish their remaining group tasks (see Chapter 7).

Because of these concerns, Central Primary School, like most Chinese schools, views reducing "premature love" among children as one of the core tasks of sex education (Bakken, 2000). In this process, a link has been built between "premature love" and disciplinary punishment or criticism. For example, in Central Primary School, criticizing children and/or calling their parents in for a serious talk in teachers' offices were the most frequent approaches used by teachers when they noticed children's engagement in inappropriate heterosexual interactions and relationships. Such a punishment-oriented strategy is also reported by other scholars as existing in most Chinese schools. In addition, there are rules and regulations against "premature love", under which the offenders would receive disciplinary punishment (e.g., verbal and official warnings or even expulsion if students engaged in premarital sex) (Farrer, 2006; Shen, 2015).

The above discussion of teachers' discouraging attitudes towards childhood heterosexual relationships suggests that they viewed children as "sexual becomings", who are not ready to practice adults' heterosexual relationships that might include sexual behaviour. However, this does not mean that these teachers viewed the children as asexual. In fact, teachers simultaneously

acknowledged children as “sexual beings”, who have the knowledge and desire to learn and practise sexuality (Renold, 2005). For example, in several group chats with teachers in the P5 and P6 office, teachers commonly complained that the increasing degree of sexualization of children (e.g., a growing number of children starting to show an interest in opposite-gender peers, along with knowledge of heterosexual romantic relationships from a younger age) made the task of forbidding “premature love” among children ever more difficult. The media were commonly blamed for the stressful circumstance that ‘children now are getting more and more mentally precocious (*zaoshu*)’ (as stated by one P5 teacher, Field note, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2016). For instance, in chats, most of the teachers complained about the Internet’s negative influence on children, because they had sometimes heard boys using nasty and pornified words about sex in chats, and found after talking with them that they had learned these words from the Internet.

Mulholland claims (2015:732) that, in the West, there is a trend to ‘pornification’ – ‘a wide range of highly (hetero-)sexualized visual representational practices and products [...] in advertising, music videos and mainstream entertainments’. Similarly, this trend has been observed in the Chinese context. In China, sexuality was formerly regarded as a “forbidden zone” and excluded from public discourse (Aresu, 2009; Liang et al., 2017). However, in contemporary China, ‘sex and sexuality have become visible and publicly discussed components of everyday life’ (Jeffreys and Yu, 2015:14), appearing ‘in different forms across media and educational materials’ (Evans, 2007:157). In such a context, scholars increasingly discuss the fact that children are being more and more sexualized (Mulholland, 2015). Thus, teachers might feel under greater stress because of children’s easy access to the Internet, which challenges adults’ authority as they try to control the pathway of children’s sexualization (e.g., ‘what sexual knowledge children should have access to, in what form and at what time’: Moore and Reynolds, 2018:122-123).

When treating children as knowledgeable and curious “sexual beings” growing up in the context of ‘pornified’ media, another idea commonly shared among P5 and P6 teachers was that, as claimed by a class teacher:

Only relying on forbidding is not enough. It is impossible to forbid them all. Students are in the age to start to be curious about this [heterosexual romantic relationships]. The more you do not allow them to do, the more they want to try; the more you do not allow them to talk, the more they want to talk. They are smart; they do not allow you to find them. They do privately behind you; how can you know everything? We cannot follow them 24 hours. So, I think we need to guide students, to help them to transfer their focus on “liking” to something else. To guide them to make “liking” become their motivation to improve themselves. (Field note, 23<sup>th</sup> June 2016)

Like the interviewees in Evans’s (2007:157) work, these teachers also recognize the importance of communication, because exclusive reliance on attempts to control “premature love” was ineffectual. Therefore, apart from patrolling and criticizing children engaged in suspicious behaviours that might suggest “premature love”, in observations many teachers tried to communicate with children in such a way as to guide them to ‘transfer’ the attention they gave to heterosexuality to something more “appropriate” at school. For instance, in many observed conversations between teachers and children on the subject of “liking”, the teachers constructed good academic performance as an advantage in attracting opposite-gender peers, thus teaching the children to hold on to their desirability in relation to “premature love”, but to concentrate on studying. I was present when one of Ouyang’s (a P5 boy) teacher chatted with him about his behaviour of continually pursuing girls. The teacher said:

You need to improve your academic performance to be outstanding. This is the only way that the girls would like you.

If you do not have good achievement, why would they like you?<sup>51</sup> (Field note, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

In this example, by building a connection between popularity and academic performance, the teacher suggests that study could, in fact, enhance Ouyang's romantic experiences in the future. This idea was not only expressed by this teacher in this episode but was evident in children's conversation. As discussed in the following section, a child with "good academic performance" was commonly voted by both boys and girls as an attractive one among opposite-gender peers. Through building up this link between heterosexual attraction and study, these teachers might simultaneously achieve the two most wanted outcomes of sex education in Chinese schools: reducing "premature love" among children, and improving their academic performance and the quality of the school ethos (Bakken, 2000:356).

In sum, this section (5.2) unpacks the situation that, in both children's and teachers' talk, although curiosity about heterosexual "liking" is viewed as "normal", practices of heterosexuality, especially practices involving physical intimacy, are criticized as "abnormal" and "unhealthy". It suggests that, although teachers admit that children are "sexual beings" whose interest in opposite-gender peers is a "natural" and "normal" thing, they also, even more strongly, prefer to construct children as unready "sexual becomings" (Renold, 2005) who need to be protected from dangerous sexuality (Moore and Reynolds, 2018:3). The children's practice of emphasizing the age of 18 to make it clear that they are too young for heterosexual relationships also suggests their acceptance of being constructed as "sexual becomings" (Renold, 2005). Therefore, in Central Primary School, as in most other Chinese schools, practices of heterosexuality were labelled problematic "premature love" (Farrer 2006; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015; Shen, 2015) which was not allowed among children. Under pressure of continual surveillance, loaded with

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<sup>51</sup> This example was considered a 'sensitive topic' and was followed by double-checking for permission to include it in my data. I am confident that my rapport with him was strong enough to make him feel OK about rejecting my use of this data, as he did in other situations.

evaluation by surrounding peers and teachers who constitute significant 'witnesses' in crowded school settings (Thorne, 1993:52-53), gender separation, especially physical separation between boys and girls, is assumed to be 'something desirable, rather than problematic' (Liu, 2006:428). Therefore, children commonly paid particular attention to gender boundaries, especially physical distance, in interactions with opposite-gender peers in public spaces at school.

However, as the teachers noted above complained, children would challenge the adults' authority (Farrer, 2006) and practice heterosexuality privately. In the process of constructing gender rules, 'children think and behave as individuals and as active agents [...] rather than as a homogenous collective' (Mayeza, 2017:484). Therefore, although the school authority forbade children's practices of heterosexuality, children did not completely follow such rules about gender proximity. In fact, it was not uncommon to observe children's desire to increase the frequency of interactions with opposite-gender peers whom they liked. However, for children, the most challenging part of their practice of heterosexuality was finding ways to protect themselves from being teased by other peers or "caught" by their teachers in such practices. Therefore, the following section focuses on several strategies employed by the children for practising heterosexuality at school.

### **5.3 Same-gender intimate friendship in children's romantic adventures**

In private conversations (e.g., interviews, one-to-one chats and the "diary programme") with a small number of boys and more than half of the girls, the children more or less admitted that it was fun and exciting to be involved in some practices of heterosexuality. However, they 'may not always act on' their desires for interactions and relationships with opposite-gender peers (Underwood, 2007:523) in public spaces at school because of the teasing and the discouraging context as discussed above. Therefore, children have



developed their own strategies to protect themselves in their daily practices of heterosexuality against being teased by peers or “caught” by their teachers.

By displaying my role as an “older sister” (see also Emond, 2000; Lin, 2017) instead of a “teacher” in the rapport-building process with children, I was increasingly accepted by children to the extent of getting a glimpse of their heterosexual romantic involvements. Most importantly, through hearing in private conversations (e.g., interviews, one-to-one chats and the “diary programme”) a small number of boys’ and many girls’ stories about romantic experiences, I found out more and more about “where” and “when” to direct my focus to observe children’s practices of heterosexuality. Based on an educational ethnography of children in primary school, Best (1983) argues that children’s sexual learning and practising is the “third hidden curriculum” that usually takes place away from adults’ surveillance. Renold (2005:33) highlights time and space as important elements when locating sexuality in school settings (see also Chapter 2). Similarly, children in Central Primary School were keen to locate their heterosexual romantic involvements in inconspicuous times and spaces. Thus, at the beginning of the fieldwork, in public spaces I rarely observed intimate interactions between boys and girls. In most cases, I learned about such interaction (e.g., sending gifts and love letters) from the children’s narratives in private conversations. Through reviewing these narratives, I then noticed that although different children chose different means of expressing their affection to the ones they liked, these actions always took place during the same time period and in a similar place. The specific time period was after evening self-study time and before the children arrived in their dormitory buildings; the specific space was the path from the classrooms to the dormitory buildings, including the hallways, the entrance to the teaching building, and the playground. There are two possible reasons why the children decided to choose these particular times and spaces. Firstly, children might feel less stressed away from the gaze of watchful adults during these times because, in the evening, there were only four on-duty teachers and two

wardens on the entire campus to supervise children. Secondly, the path from the classrooms to the dormitory building is dimly lit, which made them feel that their interactions could go unwitnessed in the relative darkness. After gaining this information from children, I updated my observation plan and successfully observed several P5 boys' and girls' heterosexual romantic involvements by myself.

Therefore, the following discussions use data collected both in private conversations with children, especially girls, and in observations, to explain how the children negotiate space, time and same-gender intimate friendships to increase interactions with the opposite-gender peers whom they liked and to reject unwanted pursuers.

#### **5.3.1 “She deserves a better boy”: same-gender intimate friends as “candidate” selection panel members and gatekeepers**

In girls' narratives about their suitors, a small group clearly pointed out that their same-gender intimate friends served as “candidate” selection panel members, who have a significant influence on their attitudes toward their suitors. Apart from learning from children's narratives, on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2016 in a P5 girls' dormitory room, I observed an episode that showed how such a “panel” works:

When Cai showed the girls a necklace which was left in her desk by Ouyang as a gift, the other girls laughed and passed it around to have a look. Jieyu held up the necklace to me and complained about Ouyang's pursuit of Cai: 'I am confused. How does Ouyang have the confidence to pursue Cai? Cai is a student leader and has a good academic performance, but Ouyang, he is very bad, he is a rogue. He does not match Cai. Cai deserves a better boy. We [Cai's intimate female friends] all tell Cai to stay away from him.' When Jieyu said this, the other girls all nodded their heads and added words and phrases, such as 'yes' and 'such a daydream', to support Jieyu's argument. Cai listened and laughed with the girls. Then she said: 'Yes, you [Cai looked at Jieyu] help me to give

this back to the rogue. Who wants to have his gift?' (Field note, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

As Walton and colleagues (2002) highlight, same-gender intimate friends play an important role in listening, supporting and comforting children in their romantic adventures. These friends' opinions (e.g., approving or against) are always taken seriously (Etcheverry and Hoffman, 2013). In this example, same-gender friends, especially intimate friends, were the first ones with whom Cai chose to share romantic experiences and seek suggestions. By calling Ouyang a "rogue" and asking Jieyu to help her to return the gift to him, Cai was able to show her alignment with her girl friends' attitude towards Ouyang.

Although in this example children listened to and echoed their same-gender intimate friends' opinion of the suitors, it does not mean that children and their same-gender intimate friends could always reach agreement when judging their romantic objects (see Hongyang's case in section 5.3.3). Taking into account the widely discussed topic of "matching" in heterosexual romantic relationships among children, in this example it might be possible that Ouyang's failure to "match" Cai encouraged the girls' agreement on rejection. Among children, there were many different criteria referred to when evaluating whether or not a boy and a girl are "matching". Among these criteria, academic performance, appearance and temperament were the most prominent. These three were the most significant characteristics mentioned by children when describing desirable opposite-gender peers.

When comparing the above features affecting the attraction between boys and girls with western-based research findings (e.g. Ghaill, 1994; Walton et al., 2002; Skelton et al., 2006, 2010; Allen, 2013), both similarity and difference emerged. For example, one significant similarity is that the body plays an important role when children try to make sense of relationships with others in their school lives (e.g. James, 1993; Davies, 2015). In most P5 boys' and girls' talk, opposite-gender peers who had an attractive appearance (e.g., cute, pretty, handsome and good-looking) were frequently mentioned as desirable.

However, unlike Mulholland's (2015:741-742) finding that girls seemed comfortable about making sexual assessments (e.g., 'the guys are hot') and regard "hot" as a positive and respectable evaluation, these Chinese girls very rarely used words with sexual connotations to describe desirable opposite-gender peers in my observations. Furthermore, when they heard boys using such words to describe girls, the girls would be offended and always reported them to teachers. For example, according to girls, apart from trying to "touch" girls, a significant reason for calling some boys "rogue" was that 'they use[d] a dirty way to talk about girls, such as who is sexy, hot, and has big breasts' as explained by a P5 girl (Field note, 11<sup>th</sup> April 2016). By contrast with girls, although it was not very frequent, it was not rare, as other teachers complained, to notice sexual talk between boys (see also Thorne and Luria, 1986) when they talked about desirable heterosexual romantic relationships. In private chats with me, the words "sexy" and "hot" were directly used by a small group of boys to describe the girls who attracted them. This gender difference in sexual talk not only explains why it was always the boys rather than the girls who were condemned by teachers for inappropriate talk, but also provides further evidence of these Chinese girls' internalization of female-focused moral expectations in China (Evans, 2007).

In addition, in comparison with some western-based findings that academic performance is less valued in evaluation of a boy's popularity among girls (e.g., Ghail, 1994; Houtte, 2004; Allen, 2013), boys of good academic achievement were highly valued as desirable by many P5 girls. Moreover, in the case of girls, both boys and girls themselves commonly believed that a girl's good academic performance could contribute to her popularity among both same-gender and opposite-gender peers. As discussed previously in this chapter (section 5.2.2), this emphasis on academic achievement might result from the great importance of academic performance for rural Chinese children's future development. Apart from this contextualized emphasis on academic performance, a common emphasis on an opposite-gender peer's good

temperament (*piqi hao*) was a further contextual choice. In Central Primary School, girls took most student leader positions to supervise other, ordinary students, which caused power imbalance and tension between girls and boys (see Chapter 6). Therefore, conflicts (e.g., quarrelling, shouting and even hitting) always happened between boys and girls. In such a context, gentleness of temperament (*wenrou*) was highlighted by both boys and girls as an attractive and desirable characteristic. Thus, the above discussions suggest that the features that influence attraction between boys and girls are contextualized.

After judging a suitor's personal characteristics (e.g., academic performance, appearance, temperament), once a child and her same-gender intimate friends concluded that a particular suitor was not the "matching" one, these friends played the role of gatekeepers to keep the unwanted suitor away. For example, after the previous conversation, I kept following these girls' interactions with Ouyang. According to the girls, they had tried several approaches to keep Ouyang away from Cai. They threatened Ouyang, saying that if he did not stop pursuing Cai, they would report him to the teachers. However, as observed by Walton and colleagues (2002:685), many girls report that some boys will persist in their pursuit even when they have been warned not to. Similarly, in the Ouyang-Cai case, the girls' warning did not work. Therefore, as I noticed in observations, these girls then tried an alternative approach of using the power of 'the public (peer) gaze' (Renold, 2005:33) to 'protect' Cai from Ouyang in the way described below.

On a couple of occasions, in observations after evening self-study time, Ouyang was seen to wait in the hallway outside Cai's classroom, seeking opportunities to talk with Cai or to give her some gifts. Interestingly, in such cases, there were always a few Cai's classmates who saw Ouyang outside and returned to the classroom to alert Cai. That done, Cai always left the classroom with her intimate female friends surrounding her. Whenever Ouyang approached Cai, her female friends would try to stop him and would start to

shout warnings such as ‘Ouyang is being a rogue!’ or ‘Help!’ Their loud and sharp voices always attracted many children’s attention and, very quickly, other children came to witness the disturbance. Ouyang would normally give up when the surrounding peers started to tease and jeer at him. Then, these girls would quickly help Cai to get away from him.

This alternative approach was successful. In follow-up chats with Ouyang, he complained that because Cai’s friends clustered round her, he had no chance to develop a one-to-one private connection with her. Moreover, he was annoyed by Cai’s friends’ action of screaming to attract other children as witnesses, because he not only felt embarrassed when surrounding peers teased and jeered at him but also feared that the loud teasing noises might attract the on-duty teachers’ attention. In sum, one key factor contributing to the success of this alternative approach might be ‘the public’ (peer) gaze’ (Renold, 2005:33), exposing Ouyang’s romantic actions to a wide audience and thwarting the inconspicuousness of his pursuit. Therefore, although most P5 children have been troubled by the annoying heterosexual teasing produced by witnessing peers, as discussed in the previous section, they simultaneously learned from such experiences the “power” of such teasing and witnessing. In this case, children creatively and effectively used this “power” to increase social distance between girls and boys, thus marking and policing gender boundaries (Thorne, 1993:54) to protect their friends from unwanted suitors.

Apart from protecting children from unwanted suitors, in the field it was also common to observe children’s interactions with the opposite-gender peers whom they liked taking place simultaneously with same-gender intimate friends’ companionship.

### **5.3.2 Same-gender intimate friends' companionship matters in cross-gender interactions**

As described at the beginning of this section (5.3), the path between the classrooms and the dormitory building after the evening self-study time could provide the children with a relatively inconspicuous environment for interactions with desirable opposite-gender peers. However, for children, it was not enough just to interact in the darkness after evening self-study time with the opposite-gender peers whom they liked. Therefore, in the daytime and public areas, some children wanted to create some opportunities to spend time with these opposite-gender peers. For them, same-gender intimate friends' companionship was an indispensable condition of such publicly cross-gender interactions, to protect them from heterosexual teasing in the daytime in Central Primary School's gender separation context.

As discussed in Chapter 4, play was a key part of these P5 children's school lives. These P5 children spent almost all their free time playing with peers once they had finished their school tasks. Therefore, choosing which games to join in was an everyday requirement for all children. My observations suggest agreement with other scholars' (e.g., Corsaro and Eder, 1990; Thorne, 1993) findings about gendered game styles. Girls more often engaged in indoor small-group based chatting, drawing, reading and craft-making with intimate friends, while boys found more enjoyment in outdoor large-group based team games. However, interestingly, in private chats about heterosexuality with girls, more than half of them mentioned that in order to increase the opportunities for interacting with the boys they liked, they were also interested in engaging in the boys' games (see also Underwood, 2007).

The most popular games played by most P5 boys during my fieldwork were "Run for Time" and "Nametag Ripping Battle", learnt from the popular variety TV shows "Run for Time" and "Running Man". Both of these were competitive games that required participants to hide and seek, and run and tussle, until the

targeted participants were caught, or their nametags were ripped from their upper backs. Because these games included chasing and frequent body contact, girls commonly complained that asking and being accepted to play these games with boys were not easy. To be specific, apart from the risk of being involved in romance gossip, a source of concern for both boys and girls, these girls also worried about being negatively characterized as “*yao*” – a girl engaging in sexually forward and attention-seeking behaviours in front of boys<sup>52</sup>. Apart from producing romance gossip, amongst P5 children “*yao*” and “*niangniang qiang*”<sup>53</sup> were two terms frequently used to negatively characterize and tease children who liked to transgress the gender boundary and closely interact with opposite-gender peers. The most frequent use of these two stigmatizing words occurred when a girl or a boy played games with a group of opposite-gender peers. Therefore, how did these girls gain access to boys’ games despite the school’s gossipy environment and how did they protect themselves against being stigmatized as “*yao*”?

After learning about girls’ desire to join in boys’ games to increase the opportunities for playing with the boys they liked, I started to pay particular attention to how these girls gained access to these games. During daily observations, I noticed that they rarely asked to join the boys’ games as individuals but were always with a group of other girls. As explained by these girls in follow-up conversations, same-gender intimate friends’ company was commonly appreciated for its functions of protecting them from teasing and

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<sup>52</sup> “*Yao*” is similar to “slut” in Mulholland’s (2015) work. However, it focuses less on the body, since in China school children are not allowed make-up and must follow a conservative dress code. It focuses more on girls’ close interactions with boys and behaviours aimed at attracting boys’ attention. When children called a girl “*yao*”, they gave examples such as ‘she loves to play with boys’ and ‘she always makes extremely cute and talks sweetly in front of boys’.

<sup>53</sup> “*Niangniang qiang*” was used to tease a boy for his sissy behaviour with a metaphor of homosexuality, an example of ‘homophobic language’ (McCormack, 2014). In the setting, I did not recognize the children who were beginning to identify themselves as homosexual. In due course, the use of “*niangniang qiang*” was likely a form of homophobic bullying as noticed by Rivers (2011:90), directed at some ‘young people who were simply labelled “gay” because it represented the ultimate insult’.



improving the chance of being allowed by the boys to join in the games. For example, Jieyu, a P5 girl, said:

If you go alone, the other people will be gossipy. They will say you came for someone. It will also be difficult for them to decide, because they might want to allow you to join, but they are also afraid of the gossip. But if you go with other girls, the more the better, people will say nothing, because there are so many people (Field note, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

Thorne (1993:69) points out that, in some cases, gender terms could override individual identities. According to Jieyu, when the children interacted with opposite-gender peers while in the company of same-gender intimate friends, their gender identities would override their personal identities. Hence, when an individual girl went alone to ask for the boys' permission to join in the boys' games, she only represented herself; while if she went to ask for permission along with her female friends, she represented not only herself but also her gender group. Thus, when an individual girl asked to join in boys' games, the boys' decisions were made on the basis of their attitude towards a certain individual girl. But when the girls went as a group, the question faced by the boys became whether or not to allow girls, rather than a certain individual girl, to join their game. In this case, the company of other girls could increase an individual girl's chances of being accepted to join in boys' games. Moreover, joining boys' games in companionship with other girls could conceal an individual girl's desire for a certain boy. Since interactions between boys and girls are frequent and messy in group games ("Run for Time" and "Nametag Ripping Battle"), interactions between an individual girl and the boy she liked would be less prominent and were equipped with a "good reason" (e.g., 'we are just playing the group game like everyone else', as defended by some girls in observations). As a result, the children would worry less about being teased and criticized for their cross-gender interactions. In sum, although this strategy might not succeed every time according to my observations and children's

narratives<sup>54</sup>, it does suggest another creative strategy by children, namely using the idea of “gender group” to camouflage their individual identities and motivations in cross-gender interactions.

Both this subsection and the previous one suggest the importance of supportive same-gender intimate friends in children’s romantic adventures. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, friends, as subjects of emotionally charged intimate relationships (Greco et al., 2015), can also bring children stress in their romantic adventures (Walton et al., 2002). Therefore, the following subsection shifts the focus to explore the stress that children experienced in the process of balancing same-gender intimate friendship and heterosexual romance.

### **5.3.3 Who is more important? Competition between friendship and romance**

Since friendship and romance both matter in children’s middle childhood (Walton et al., 2002), conflicts between these two types of intimate peers can cause children significant emotional stress. In conversations with both boys and girls, it was not rare for children to report the emotional stress they experienced because of the conflict between friendship and romance. In their complaints, three commonly shared issues troubled most of these children: friends also liking the ones they liked; friends hating the ones they liked; and friends caring more about romantic relationships than about friendship. For example, I was always asked questions such as: “What would you do if your friends also likes the one you like?”, ‘What should I do? My friends hate the one I like’, and ‘Will you forgive your friends if they care more about the boys than you?’

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<sup>54</sup> Briefly, in some cases, this strategy did not work, especially when some boys engaged in the games “really hated” someone in the girl group. In such case, boys likely refused the girl group’s request. If a boy encouraged other boys to allow girls to join in, it was likely that he would be teased as the one who liked one of the girls or shamed as one who feared girls (see Chapter 6).

Because same-gender intimate friends tend to be deeply involved in children's romantic experiences, as discussed in previous subsections, the situation might sometimes end up as a romantic contest between same-gender intimate friends. In both P5(1) and P5(2), there were a couple of cases of girls and their intimate girl friends simultaneously or successively liking the same boys. Because romantic contests between friends could be a threat to friendship (Walton et al., 2002:679), two girls emotionally disclosed how upset and disappointed they were when they recognized that their friends were interested in the same boys as they were. However, among these P5 girls, it was very rare to observe or hear them fighting over boys. The most common result when two friends, especially intimate friends, liked the same boy, was that one girl "gave up" the romance to maintain the friendship.

Through chatting with them I found a common belief among girls that, as stated by Duan, a P5 girl, 'it is shameful to have conflicts with close friends because of a boy. [...] I am afraid to break the friendship' (Interview, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016). These girls' feeling that conflict with close friends over boys was shameful might suggest a gendered subjectivity in children's attitudes to romance, in that 'boys, but not girls, could fight for a desirable romantic object' (Walton et al., 2002:684). In addition, in Central Primary School, because of the Chinese sociocultural value of harmony (*hexie*) (see Chapter 7), 'no quarrel' and 'no fight' were frequently highlighted by children to assign value to the harmonious friendship. The fear of breaking the friendship not only shows these girls' strong determination to maintain friendships when dealing with conflicts within friendship (MacEvoy and Asher, 2012), but also indicates their choice of placing friendship with same-gender close friends above heterosexual romance. In fact, in keeping with Duan's remark, it seems that, for both girls and boys, there is a friendship-romance "rule": when friendship and romance conflict, children are expected to place friendship first (or at least achieve a reasonable balance); otherwise, there might be a risk of being criticized by friends, as in the examples below.

Apart from cases of friends being romantically interested in the same person, a couple of children also complained emotionally that they needed to make a stressful choice between friendship and romance when the same-gender intimate friends “hated” the ones they liked. Chapter 4 (section 4.2.2) presents a conflict that arose between Hongyang and his intimate friends (Xiaoming and Dong) because he did not honestly let his friends know that he liked Taozi, a P5 girl. After that episode, conflicts between these three boys arose again because Xiaoming and Dong did not like Taozi and tried to persuade Hongyang to stay away from this girl. Such conflicts not only show the tension of having to choose between romance and friendship, but also indicate children’s fear of being seen, and mocked, as people who are controlled by heterosexual desire to the extent of placing “lovers” above friends (see also Giordano et al., 2006).

Xiaoming told me that they (Xiaoming, Dong and Hongyang) fight. Xiaoming said he and Dong do not like Taozi because she is “yao” and grumpy; they thought Taozi does not match Hongyang. Xiaoming and Dong have tried to persuade Hongyang [to give her up] many times. However, Hongyang did not listen; he kept ignoring Xiaoming’s and Dong’s advice to play with Taozi. Xiaoming and Dong were annoyed and spoke ill of Taozi in front of Hongyang. Hongyang was annoyed and quarrelled with them. In the quarrel, Xiaoming and Dong attacked Hongyang by saying he is ‘*zhongse qingyou*’, which irritated Hongyang and then they fight. [...] In follow-up chats with Hongyang, he was emotional and complained that he was very stressed because he was in the dilemma that ‘[I] do not want to give up Taozi but I also do not want to lose brothers’ (Field note, 4th May 2016)

In this example, although Taozi was rejected by Hongyang’s same-gender intimate friends, Hongyang insisted on being with Taozi. His decision to ignore friends’ advice in order to stay with Taozi and to quarrel with friends because of Taozi significantly annoyed Xiaoming and Dong because it suggested that Hongyang did not choose them in this “friends or lovers” contest. In this case, they used “*zhongse qingyou*” to criticize Hongyang. “*Zhongse qingyou*” means putting romantic relationships above friendship, and is traditionally used as a

stigmatized-manhood phrase to shame men who were controlled by their desire for women and thus were 'unreliable and untrustworthy' (Zheng, 2008:454, 2012b) in male friendships. In the field, although "*zhongse qingyou*" is no longer male-focused phrase but a phrase used by both boys and girls to complain about their friends' failure to balance same-gender intimate friendships and heterosexual romance, it is still a criticism that stigmatizes. Hongyang's angry reaction to the charge of being "*zhongse qingyou*" could demonstrates this.

Apart from this example, in a small number of girls' narratives, "*zhongse qingyou*" was used when they complained that their friends could not guarantee them a similar level of attention and company after they had developed a crush. These girls reported that they felt jealous, upset and neglected when their friends paid more attention to boys than to them. Some of them said that they were disgruntled when they noticed that their friends were increasingly interested in talking about boys and pondering/creating opportunities to play with boys. Since bringing along same-gender intimate friends as a companionship group was a creative strategy used by some girls to increase the opportunities to play games with boys they liked (see 5.3.1), a couple of girls, like Xiaoyue, a P5 girl, complained in particular that they had less time to play girls' games as they had to accompany their friends to play with the boys (Field note, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2016). They added that when they were fed up with these boys' games and refused their friends' requests for companionship, their friends' complaints made them feel that they were being used as 'tools for boys rather than close friends' (as Xiaoyue put it). Xiaoyue's complaint suggests that since most intimate friends always behaved as the expected source of support (see Chapter 4), there might be a risk of some children increasingly taking for granted friends' support in their romantic adventures, ignoring their friends' sacrifice of things like play time. Therefore, a failure to balance the attention paid to friendship and romance respectively could be a source of tension between friends.

In sum, this section (5.3) indicates that, although it was risky, children still developed many strategies to increase their opportunities for interacting and spending time with the ones they liked. In Central Primary School's teasing and discouraging context, the company of same-gender intimate friends played a significant role in the process of protecting and contributing to romance experiences. However, the close connection between friendship and romance could also present certain challenges, which could cause children stress when they had to choose sides. This section uses children's daily practice of heterosexuality to provide evidence that their experiences of same-gender intimate friendship and romance are interwoven: children's friendship and romance can simultaneously shape each other (Walton et al., 2002; Etcheverry and Hoffman, 2013).

## **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter shows these P5 Chinese children's considerable curiosity, excitement, anxiety and creativity in talking about and practising romance and heterosexual relationships at school. It discusses how children accommodated their teachers' guidance by drawing a "fine line" between the "normal" and "abnormal" in heterosexuality in childhood, and describes how children creatively practiced heterosexuality away from teachers' surveillance and supported by the companionship of same-gender friends.

This chapter starts its exploration of the rules of gender proximity among children by exploring why romance gossip was an effective heterosexual teasing approach used by children to ridicule peers' cross-gender interactions in the context of gender separation at school (see also Chapter 2). Through investigating the roots of the most annoying and stigmatizing contents of romance gossip – namely, boyfriend-girlfriend relationships including physical intimacy – this chapter suggests that these children echoed their teachers in characterizing practices of heterosexuality in childhood (e.g., "premature love") as "abnormal", "unhealthy" and "forbidden", at least in public talk. This attitude

towards heterosexuality in childhood is common in Chinese school settings. In most Chinese schools, children were expected to show self-control (*zikong*) (Bakken, 2000:364) when dealing with their interest in opposite-gender peers. Therefore, performing the desirability of heterosexual relationships, especially “premature love” with physical intimacy (e.g., sexual behaviours), is officially forbidden in Chinese school settings as it offends Chinese civilized sexual morality (Farrer, 2006; Shen, 2015) and risks children’s future development by diverting their attention from school work (Liu, 2006; Shen, 2015).

The concern over “premature love” leads teachers to patrol the campus to investigate suspicious intimate cross-gender interactions and punish children involved in “premature love” (Liu, 2006; Farrer, 2006). Therefore, on public occasions at school, most children tended to hide their desire for romance and heterosexual relationships and paid careful attention to the gender boundary, especially physical distance, in interactions with opposite-gender peers. In this situation, both children and teachers strengthen the gender segregation context during public occasions at school.

However, since teachers could not always be present, when away from teachers’ surveillance, children were creative in putting their feelings of “liking” someone into practice. In these practices, same-gender friends play a significant role (Walton et al., 2002; Giordano et al., 2006). They can influence children’s attitudes toward suitors, forming a kind of shelter against unwanted suitors and heterosexual teasing in children’s romantic adventures. However, the relationship between same-gender friendship and heterosexual romance is complex (Walton et al., 2002). Children who did not maintain a good balance between friendship and romance were likely to experience the emotionally charged dilemma of having to choose a side. In the Chinese context, apart from the risk of losing friends, children faced a risk of being criticized as “*zhongse qingyou*” if they placed romance above friendship.

Children's methods of putting heterosexual "liking" into practice in the school context, under threat of heterosexual teasing from peers (Thorne, 1993; Mellor, 2006) and surveillance and disciplinary punishment from teachers (Farrer, 2006; Shen, 2015), suggest their considerable curiosity, excitement and creativity not only in pursuing romance and heterosexual relationships but also in challenging adult authority (Farrer, 2006; Corsaro, 2015). Therefore, as argued by both Central Primary School's teachers and other scholars, attempts to control "premature love" are ineffectual (Evans, 2007). In the present case, this chapter yields two implications for the attitudes of Chinese schools, such as Central Primary School, towards children's desire for romance and heterosexual relationships.

Firstly, the control-focused and problem-driven attitudes toward children's interest in opposite-gender peers might benefit from incorporating some approaches focused on 'prepare rather than limit, and educate on choice and agency alongside risk and danger' (Moore and Reynolds, 2018:253), and on greater communicative support rather than control (Evans, 2007). Secondly, in Central Primary School, the importance of "normality" in evaluating an individual child's process of sexualization was prominent (e.g., children's behaviours were labelled as "normal" or "abnormal" or "mentally precocious"). This overemphasis on "normality" creates a risk of stereotyping children rather than being sensitive to their diversity (Moore and Reynolds, 2018). Such a tendency in the school setting might lead to a group of children, such as Ouyang and a couple of other boys and girls who showed stronger interest in heterosexual relationships and more overt behaviours when engaging in them, being frequently teased by peers and criticized by teachers. Although it was not detailed in this chapter, these children were indeed troubled by these exclusionary experiences, as emerged in both observations and conversations (e.g., crying, yelling, and fighting). Therefore, it might be important for teachers to be aware of the diversity of children so as to know them and work out effective ways to guide them.



If these implications were followed through and applied in Chinese schools, they might provide children with a less strained context in which to learn about heterosexuality, with teachers' support. Moreover, they might be of benefit to children's other peer relationships: for example, as has been seen in this chapter, it often happened that 'friendship and romance [emerge] as separate but related matters at stake' (Walton et al., 2002:678). Therefore, it was not rare for children to have to manage emotionally charged conflicts between friendship and romance. However, it was likely that, because of the strained context of romance, children were left without sufficient support from teachers to guide them in managing these conflicts.

Besides adding insight into Chinese children's understandings and experiences of romance and heterosexual relationships at school, the examples in this chapter endorse the methodological implication that rapport and the researcher's "least adult" role matter for studies of gender and sexuality in childhood (Epstein, 1998). In the field, thanks to my "least adult" role as "older sister", I gained access to children's, particularly girls', private conversations and practices of heterosexuality, thus gaining a glimpse of how children used creative strategies to negotiate the surrounding contexts in practising heterosexuality. However, I could not deny that my gender role as an "older sister" presented both opportunities and restrictions (Thorne, 1993; see Chapter 3). For example, in comparison to what I knew about girls, I did not have an equal amount of data about boys' private conversations and practices of heterosexuality – such as their reactions when two friends liked the same girl. Further studies are needed to fill such data gaps as are caused by my gender identity (see also Chapter 8), to contribute an even more comprehensive understanding of how Chinese children understand and practise heterosexual relationships at school.

Exploration of cross-gender interactions between children not only raises the issues of gender separation and heterosexuality as discussed in this chapter, but also presents a specific example of cross-gender friendship called "*toukao*

*nvsheng*" (relying on girls). This cross-gender friendship type was thoroughly discussed by a small group of children in interviews and mentioned by many other children in daily conversations and observations. It was this example that turns the spotlight onto the next chapter's exploration of another friendship type among P5 children: friendship with a particular emphasis on friends' instrumental usefulness in the service of personal interests.

## **Chapter 6 Instrumental friendship: befriending “useful” peers as a strategy to benefit the individual’s school experiences**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapters have discussed children’s intimate friendship with their special friends (e.g., “best friend”, “good friend” and “close friend”) as a mutually nominated, multistranded, and emotionally charged relationship between friends, incorporating high levels of intimacy and expectation (see Chapter 4). In such ‘multistranded’ friendship (Pahl and Spencer, 2004:207), although friends’ instrumental function (e.g., intimate same-gender friends’ support in children’s heterosexual romantic adventures as discussed in Chapter 5) is one prominent element, friends’ “usefulness” is not the most highly prioritized reason for friendship establishment. However, as Hundley and Cohen (1999) note, children can have various experiences of different types of friendship in contextualized situations. Among these P5 children, there seemed to be another type of friendship, in which friends’ “usefulness” in helping one to achieve personal goals at school is particularly emphasized. For example, when children explained why certain peers were their friends, apart from the reasons based on liking and enjoyment (e.g., ‘I like him/her’ and ‘I enjoy playing with him/her’), around half of P5 children also stated that they befriended certain other children because these friends were high-achieving (*youxiu*). Thus they were commonly noted as “useful” friends for themselves (*dui ziji you bangzhu*).

When naming children’s friendship with “useful” friends, I was inspired by the discussions about instrumental friendship in existing friendship literature. Friendship is not a homogeneous concept; it can be categorized into different types, such as intimate friendship, instrumental friendship, and sociable friendship, in different situations (Wolf, 1966, 2001; Badhwar, 1993; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Tang, 2010). The difference between intimate friendship and

instrumental friendship has been well debated. One of the most significant differences between these two types is: intimate friendship emphasizes friendship as a loving relationship (e.g., ‘friendship is an end in itself and serves no higher goal than caring for each other’ (Berenskoetter, 2014:53)); while instrumental friendship is chiefly valued for its ‘usefulness’ (Kapur, 1991:483). In the latter, the friendship extends social networks, thus accessing resources for economic and social gain (e.g. Armytage, 2015).

This instrumental friendship is studied not only as it occurs between adults (e.g., instrumental friendship in the workplace for economic and social resources) (Wolf, 2001; Ellison et al., 2007; Cronin, 2014; Armytage, 2015) but also as found between children in school settings. For example, the emphasis on friends’ “usefulness” and friendship’s instrumental benefit has been noted by some scholars in the Chinese context. In their comparison of Chinese and Canadian boys’ understandings of peer relationships, Chen and colleagues (2004:211) found that ‘how friendship may be helpful or useful in a concrete manner’ is considered and emphasized by more than fifty percent of the Chinese respondents. For this group of Chinese boys, the instrumental aspect of friendship, such as ‘salient behavioural characteristics of the friend and benefits that friendship can provide (e.g. “he is good at math, and he often helps with my homework”)’ (p. 211), is viewed as a very important factor in boys’ choice of friends (Chen et al., 2004). Therefore, being inspired both by existing literature and by my own fieldwork, this chapter adopts the phrase “instrumental friendship” to refer to a type of friendship based on friends’ “usefulness” and the function of friendship in the service of personal interests. In this type of friendship, the “useful” friend is referred to as an “instrumental friend”.

Although instrumental friendship has been differentiated from intimate friendship in some definitions, as discussed above, in the field it is not always easy to recognize a child’s instrumental friend solely through reliance on observation. For example, some observed interactions between children and

their intimate friends might be similar to those between children and their instrumental friends. Therefore, it was children's narratives about their friends in our daily conversations that indicated those children who might be their instrumental friends; these were then updated following observations. For instance, in the field, when observing a small group of children's interactions with some peers who were praised by these children as useful "friends" for their personal development, the children's joyful facial expressions, enthusiastic body language and caring voices might suggest that they were intimate friends. However, in private conversations with me, these children clearly disclosed that they did not like these peers' personalities (describing them as, e.g., dishonest, grumpy, biased or extremely sensitive) but needed to befriend them for certain instrumental reasons. Therefore, in the field, the cases of instrumental friendship were targeted and analysed mainly on the basis of conversations with the children about their reasons for and experiences of befriending some friends for instrumental-oriented purposes that were prioritized. However, apart from talk-based data, observation-based data are also involved as support in setting up the particular context and providing interpretations.

This chapter uses three main sections to explore why some P5 children were keen to form instrumental friendships and how these friendships influence children's school experiences. The first section discusses how the school's values and management systems give a certain group of children power over their peers, who then welcome them as ideal subjects with whom to develop instrumental friendships. The second section focuses on discussing what reciprocal benefits children who have power over their peers can gain from such instrumental friendships. The last section firstly discusses the potential risks children might incur when their instrumental friends have power over them. It then progresses to a discussion of whether or not such instrumental friendship is in fact "friendship". The concluding section wraps up the

characteristics of instrumental friendship and discusses what consideration of it adds to my understandings of these P5 children's friendships.

## **6.2 Power over peers: who are the “useful” friends in a Chinese school?**

In conversations with the children, benefits that could be gained from friendships stand out as a significant reason for befriending certain peers. Among these benefits, making their school lives better was mentioned once by more than half of P5 children, using themselves or other peers as examples to support the claim that befriending high-achieving (*youxiu de*) peers was “useful”. The group of peers who were frequently characterized as high-achieving always shared certain characteristics: showing good academic performance and disciplined behaviour, and holding positions as student leaders.

When these high-achieving peers were constructed as “useful” friends, children commonly expected the benefits of learning from them and gaining support in improving their own academic performance and disciplined behaviour. For example, Bing, a P5 girl, gives a typical summary of the benefits of befriending high-achieving peers:

‘... [befriending high-achieving ones] can make their academic performance better; behaviours improve a bit, because they can learn from [high-achieving ones]. (Field note, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

As argued by Morrison and Burgman (2009:148), children's academic achievement can influence their acceptance by their classmates. In turn, this acceptance can shape their classroom experiences and affect their friendships, as good academic achievement can bring children value in peer groups. In this project, supplementing the discussion in Chapter 5 to the effect that poor academic performance is a disadvantage that undermines a child's popularity among opposite-gender peers, the majority of P5 children agreed that poor

academic performance is likely to cause a child to be marginalized at school by surrounding peers, especially those with better academic performance.

Most of the P5 children explained that academic performance functions as a 'boundary' to divide children into hierarchical groups, consisting of students with good academic performance (*youdeng sheng*), middle-ranked students (*zhongdeng sheng*), and students with poor academic performance (*cha sheng*) (see also Wu, 2016). In observations, children in general adhered to such a boundary by playing with those in the same hierarchical group. For example, the principle that 'people with good academic performance play together and people with poor academic performance play together', as stated by Jieyu, a P5 girl (Interview, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016), was commonly invoked by children, especially the high-achieving ones, as the "play rule" they needed to explain to me. In due course, children with poor academic performance were likely to be 'left out of games run by children with good academic performance', as Liwen, a P5 girl, complained (Interview, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2016). This exclusive "play rule" was given as an example by a number of children on a range of occasions (e.g., informal chats, formal interviews and school work) to criticize some peers' discriminatory actions that had hurt their feelings.

Apart from being left out of games, being excluded when children were grouped into working groups was also frequently complained about by children with poor academic performance, as a negative experience of being marginalized at school. In fact, through comparison of children's reactions to being excluded from games and during the grouping process, it seems that being left out of groups was more painful. For example, in observations, after showing their anger (e.g., complaining, grumbling and cursing) towards the peers who rejected them when they wanted to join in games, many children turned to playing with other peers, such as those in the same hierarchical group as themselves. However, once a child was excluded in the grouping process, very likely the child would begin to cry and ask the teacher to intervene. Forming working groups was one of the most important aspects of

children's everyday school lives in Central Primary School. For children, being in a working group matters not only because of its function of helping them to identify themselves in the Confucian-collectivist context (see Chapter 7), but also because the majority of school tasks needed to be conducted as group work.

In Central Primary School, children in each class were required to group themselves into four to seven working groups, depending on the total number of students in a class<sup>55</sup>. Each working group had around six members, including one working group leader. In almost all daily school tasks, such as course work and daily classroom/campus cleaning tasks, the students were required to cooperate with their groupmates as units, working and assuming responsibilities together. Teachers explained that, with the aim of promoting children's participation, they were encouraged to group themselves. In both children's narratives and my observations, in the process of grouping working groups, high-achieving children, who both had good academic performance and behaved well in school, were always the most welcome, while children with poor academic performance, especially these with behaviour issues, were always the ones left behind. In an informal conversation with Lili, a P5 girl, on 2nd June 2016, she mentioned the chaotic fighting for peers with good academic performance that took place during the formation of working groups at the very beginning of the 2016 spring semester, before I arrived at the field. According to Lili, people with high academic performance were so popular and sought-after by the different groups that they could even attach conditions to joining, such as only if a friend could be involved in the same group. Unlike

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<sup>55</sup> Children had both regular working groups, which were normally grouped once per semester but might be re-grouped in special circumstances (e.g., serious conflicts between group members), and temporary working groups, which were formed to deal with certain school tasks (e.g., school trips and events). According to children, the process of grouping was as follows: first, children nominated some high-achieving peers as group leader candidates; then the class teacher reviewed the candidates and appointed the group leaders. Group leaders subsequently negotiated with peers to choose the group members; the class teacher reviewed the list of names to approve it or ask for change. Teachers would ask to change the list if some children were left behind or some groups were "too strong/weak", that is, involving too many students with good/poor academic performance.



these children with good academic performance, children with poor academic performance were likely to be marginalized by peers in the grouping process. In the field, I sometimes observed chaotic situations when some children with poor academic performance were rejected by all working groups in the grouping process, or were “expelled” by their current working groups. In follow-up chats with teachers after they were called on to intervene, they were not surprised because ‘it’s common that “*cha sheng*” (children with poor academic performance) are discriminated and excluded at school’, as explained by one class teacher and echoed by other teachers in the P5 and 6’s shared office (Field note, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2016).

One possible reason for children’s preference for high-achieving peers in the grouping process is another closely connected student organizing system maintained in Central Primary School – the points-earning/ranking competition system. As noted by Bakken (2000:259), Chinese schools always employ some disciplinary techniques of evaluation, such as a points-earning/ranking system, to record, measure and rank children’s everyday “*biaoxian*”: employing plus/add points (*jiafeng*) for good “*biaoxian*”, and minus/deduct points (*koufen*) for bad “*biaoxian*”. In Central Primary School, a points-earning/ranking system was applied at both the class level and the school level to evaluate children’s “*biaoxian*”. In the Chinese context, “*biaoxian*” means “‘to show, display, manifest, express’, or even “show off”,’ which is used to ‘check each individual’s attitude towards the prescribed norms’, and to ‘compare individual behaviour against the prescribed standards’ (Bakken, 2000:232). Therefore, at school, a Chinese child’s “*biaoxian*” is good or bad depending on whether or not his/her attitudes and behaviours accord with the prescribed norms and standards in the Chinese school environment. Xu and colleagues (2006:273) argue that:

Chinese school environments remain orderly and authoritarian, and the ideal Chinese child is still described as one who is academically competent and achievement-oriented, has high moral character, and is prosocial, group-oriented, and modest.

Such values emerged as well in daily conversations with both children and teachers in Central Primary School. Thus, in this school, children's academic performance, disciplined behaviour and moral development were three of the main criteria for evaluating children's "*biaoxian*" in its points-earning/ranking system. For example, in observations, a child who actively participated in lessons and correctly answered the teachers' questions could win points; a child who was caught breaking the school rules could lose points; a child who did not pocket cash found on the ground but handed it to teachers could win points. The number of points children had gained were valued by themselves, their teachers and parents, as embodiments of their school achievement. High-achieving children were always praised by teachers and parents for their good "*biaoxian*", as proved by the high points they gained.

Because this system of competition was closely linked with the group-based work model, each child's good/bad "*biaoxian*" could add/deduct points not only in the child's own account but also in his/her working group's account. The points earned by each child and each working group were used to award the titles of "outstanding student" (*youxiu xuesheng*) and "outstanding working group" (*youxiu xiaozu*) in class at the end of every month and semester. Therefore, for a working group, each group member's "*biaoxian*" could have significant influence on that of the group. In this case, a high-achieving child's good "*biaoxian*" was not only a meaningful personal matter but also affected his or her working group's chances of success. For example, in children's talk, a child with good academic performance could not only win points for his/her working group in academic tasks, but could also be an important resource for improving his/her groupmates' academic performances by offering academic support. Moreover, a well-behaved child could not only control his/her own behaviour but also monitor that of other groupmates, to avoid breaking school rules and losing points as a consequence.

Therefore, these high-achieving children's advantage among peers not only existed because of China's orderly, authoritarian (Xu et al., 2006:273) and

academic achievement-oriented educational context (see Chapter 2), but was further strengthened by Central Primary School's group-based work model and points-earning/ranking competition system. In due course, unsurprisingly, all the P5 children spoke of their strong desire to be high-achieving. For some of them, befriending high-achieving peers was a useful strategy, offering the chance to learn and gain support from these role models, thus furthering the personal goals of improving their own academic performance, behaving better, and 'improving status (*diwei*) in class' (Qian, a P5 girl, Field note, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

High-achieving children were always viewed by the others as those with high status in the class hierarchy. In addition to popularity, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, high-achieving children can obtain high status among peers because of the likelihood of being empowered by teachers in the role of student leaders (*xuesheng ganbu*), and thus "officially" given power over ordinary students. In fact, apart from learning and gaining support from them to improve one's own academic performance and disciplined behaviour, gaining benefits from a friend's powerful role as student leader was another expected advantage of befriending high-achieving peers. This emerged clearly in children's talk, especially that of ordinary students. In Chinese educational settings, student leaders play an important role in the school's everyday student organizing and management (Bakken, 2000; Gao, 2012; Hansen, 2012, 2015; Schoenhals, 2016). Student leaders are responsible for reporting any misbehaviour among other classmates (Hansen, 2012, 2015). These positions were always taken by high-achieving students who are characterized as having 'good grades, disciplined behaviour, and a friendly and respectful attitude toward other students and teachers' (Hansen, 2015:59). Similarly, at Central Primary School, a high-achieving child who had good academic grades

and behaved well was likely to be nominated and elected by classmates, then selected by teachers as a student leader<sup>56</sup>.

In these P5 children's talk, student leaders were commonly characterized as the "powerful" ones who must not be provoked, as Jieyu, a P5 girl, explained:

People who do not perform well academically always have no power in front of other people, so they are easily bullied or teased by others. [...] But they [peers] do not dare to bother people with power, like me, because I could *guan* [literally translated as govern and control] them. I would say: 'If you bother me, I will deduct your and your group's points or I will report you to the teachers'. (Field note, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

According to Jieyu and the majority of other children, student leaders' authority to record, report and punish other ordinary students' misbehaviour was the main reason for their power over other peers. As described previously, Central Primary School applied a points-earning/ranking system as a disciplinary technique for evaluating children's school performance (Bakken, 2000). In such a system, only student leaders, especially on-duty student leaders, and teachers had access to the behaviour-recording book (*xingwei jizaiben*) and points-recording book (*jifen ben*) in which to record children's good/bad behaviours and add/deduct each child's and working group's points. Therefore, in observations, especially during self-study time when teachers were not

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<sup>56</sup> At Central Primary School, the student leader system operated at both a school level and a class level. At the class level, student leaders included a small number of core leader positions (e.g., class monitor (*banzhang*), vice-monitor (*fu banzhang*), and class representative for studies (*xuexi weiyuan*)) and a bigger group of supporting leaders (e.g., leaders of working groups (*xiaozuzhang*) and course representatives for different courses (*kedaibiao*)) (see also Schoenhals, 2016:11-12). The student leaders were decided upon in three steps. Children firstly nominated student leader candidates; in a class meeting, all children voted for these candidates; the class teacher reviewed the result of the vote, then officially appointed the student leaders. Student leaders with different positions hold different degrees of "power" in student management. According to children, the core student leaders were the most powerful ones because they worked as on-duty student leaders (*zhirisheng*) to supervise and record other students' behaviour, especially when the teacher was not present (e.g., class breaks and evening self-study time). Thus, when children talked about the powerful student leaders, they very likely referred to these core student leaders. These leaders' "power" in daily student management could be extended to the school level because each class's core leaders had opportunities to be student leaders at the school-level, and joined in the daily patrolling to enforce disciplined behaviour on campus.

present, it was very common to see the on-duty student leader sitting or standing behind the teacher's desk (*jiangtai*<sup>57</sup>) or patrolling the classroom, carrying these two books. When they noticed peers' misbehaviours such as chatting, playing and making noises, they would criticize these peers and require them to correct their behaviour; if the peers refused to do so, the student leaders normally recorded it and announced the number of points that had been deducted both from individual children and from their working groups. Like Jieyu, all these P5 children referred to student leaders' role of supervising ordinary students as "*guan*". In China, "*guan*" is normally used to describe the mechanisms by which adults, such as teachers and parents, look after children (Wu, 1996; Wang and Chang, 2010). It can be translated as "supervise", "monitor" or "control", to indicate a hierarchical relationship between two parties having unequal power. Therefore, student leaders' description of their relationship with ordinary students (e.g., usage of "*guan*") and their means of supervising peers (e.g., patrol and criticism) could suggest that student leaders likely replicated their teachers' ways of supervising students. In this case, the relationship between student leaders and other ordinary students was hierarchical.

Many children also pointed out that, apart from the student leaders' authority to record, report and punish ordinary students' misbehaviour, their close relationship with teachers made them powerful among peers. Because of a lack of teachers, in Central Primary School, the student leaders' role as teachers' assistants was further valued. Central Primary School had ten classrooms with around 300 students and 20 staff, including 5 logistical staff. As a consequence, many teachers reported a lack of sufficient time and energy to simultaneously deal with their academic teaching work and supervise the children from morning to night, Sunday to Friday. Thus, teachers highly valued student leaders' assistance and worked closely with them to organize and

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<sup>57</sup> In Central Primary School, as in many other Chinese schools, the front of the classroom is the "teaching area", including a blackboard on the wall and a teacher's teaching desk. The "teaching area" is on a platform one step higher than the classroom floor.

supervise other children in all matters of school routine. For example, teachers normally relied on the records provided by the on-duty student leaders to judge children's behaviour when the teachers were not present. Since frequent interactions with teachers could contribute to positive relationships with them (Morrison and Burgman, 2009:148), the majority of P5 children commonly remarked that these student leaders, especially the core ones, such as class monitor and vice-monitor, were the teachers' favourites, always trusted and supported by them. As some children complained, when they reported conflicts with student leaders to teachers, the teachers always sided with the student leaders. Therefore, as agreed by the majority of the P5 children, having a good relationship with teachers could win the student leaders additional support, trust and even protection by the teachers, which in turn contributed to the individual child's authority and status amongst his/her peers.

As representatives of teachers' authority among their peers and the favourites of teachers, student leaders' power over ordinary students can influence not only their status in the class hierarchy but also their friendships with peers. Hansen (2015) noted that in Chinese schools, students who are not in student leader positions are taught to accept the fact that 'regardless of friendship, their class monitors are obliged to report to higher authorities any misbehaviour or breaches of rules among students' (p. 102). As observed in my study, student leaders were also taught that they should not allow relationships (*guanxi*<sup>58</sup>) to influence their decisions during peer supervision (e.g., whether or not to report misdeeds). For example, in regular class meetings, "*yishi tongren*" (treating all people equally, regardless of relationships) was repeatedly highlighted by teachers as a key rule that student leaders should follow when supervising other fellow students.

However, this research found that, in practice, this rule was not always followed. In many cases, establishing good relationships with student leaders

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<sup>58</sup> See Chapter 7 for detailed discussion of "*guanxi*".

could win children certain benefits, such as not being reported for their misbehaviours. For instance, a type of cross-gender friendship called “*toukao nvsheng*” (literally translated as “relying on girls”) was commonly referred to as an example in boys’ and girls’ talk about the benefits of befriending student leaders. It was also the initial and straightforward example that inspired me to begin the exploration of instrumental friendship in the field. In comparison with other children, Ma, a P5 boy, gave the clearest explanation of the meaning and benefits of “*toukao nvsheng*” when he described in an interview how his friendship with Cai and Bing (two P5 girl student leaders) benefitted himself and his male friend Qiao (another P5 boy):

“*Toukao nvsheng*” means making friends with girls. After befriending them, they stop reporting my misbehaviours to the teachers [...] And, last time, when Qiao ran in the classroom, and the girls said they would report Qiao to the class teacher, I begged them not to, saying that Qiao is my friend. So, they did not put Qiao’s name in the record book, [...] so, “*toukao nvsheng*” could save my own life and my friends’ lives. (Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

From Ma’s account, it appears that making friends with Cai and Bing, two girl student leaders, was beneficial because it could decrease the risk to both himself and his male friend Qiao of being reported to the teachers for their misdeeds. For them, such a benefit was very likely valued because of the fear of being criticized by teachers, a fear which was commonly expressed by all the children. “Shameful” (*diuren*) was the most frequently used term to describe a child’s feelings when being criticized by teachers and blamed by groupmates. Apart from the stress imposed by the obligation to serve the collective interest, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, the “shameful” feeling might be closely linked to the idea of “*mianzi*” (face) in the Chinese context.

“*Mianzi*” in Chinese refers to an individual’s social standing and position as recognized by others, which could influence the other parties’ attitudes toward this individual in social interactions (Buckley et al., 2006). In an ethnographic study that included an exploration of the relationship between teachers’

criticism (*piping*) of students and students' feeling of losing face (*diu mianzi*) in a Chinese school setting, Schoenhals (2016) argues that a high level of sensitivity is assigned to "*mianzi*" (face) in Chinese schools. He explains that 'criticism of a student in front of other students makes a student feel a loss of face, a very serious emotional injury in China' (Schoenhals, 2016:40-41) because it undermines a person's dignity and wish to be respected in his/her own community. In the field, children who misbehaved were always criticized in class in front of other students. In each morning's class meeting, the class teacher checked the on-duty student leader's record for the previous day, especially during evening self-study time. If some children's misbehaviour was recorded, very likely the class teacher would criticize them in class in front of the other classmates. In such public criticism, as noticed by Schoenhals (2016:111) as well, I frequently witnessed children who had misbehaved being asked to stand throughout class. This was a deliberate means of causing misbehaving students to lose face by visually separating them from classmates (Schoenhals, 2016:111) and was applied as a way of punishing children for misbehaving. If a child repeatedly misbehaved, the teacher would report his/her bad "*biaoxian*" (performance) to the parents, which would most likely lead to further criticism from them.

Apart from the risk of losing face in front of other peers, being reported to teachers increases the risk of being marginalized and excluded by peers. One possibility was that the children who were always criticized by teachers in class in front of other peers were likely to be labelled "bad students". As will be discussed in Chapter 7, in contrast to high-achieving students, "bad students" were not identified by significant adults (e.g., teachers and parents) as "proper" ones for children to befriend. Moreover, following teachers' criticism, there was always a non-negotiable deduction of points<sup>59</sup>. As discussed previously,

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<sup>59</sup> In the field, it was noticed that a student leader's decision to deduct points was, to some extent, negotiable. For example, it was commonly mentioned by student leaders that they often used pencils to record peers' misbehaviours and to deduct points because these records could be erased. They explained that they did not always want to cause trouble by seriously



because of the group-based work model and points-earning/ranking competition system, a child's misbehaviour would damage his/her working group's collective "*biaoxian*" (performance), annoying his/her groupmates. In this case, it was not rare to find in observations that some erring boys were punished by their groupmates (e.g., being made to write their groupmates a letter of self-criticism (*jiantao shu*) in which they confessed their own misdeeds and promised to make amends) or were threatened by groupmates with being expelled from the group. In this case, the "usefulness" of befriending student leaders was always highlighted by children who were ordinary students, especially those boys<sup>60</sup> with behaviour problems.

In addition to the frequently mentioned friendships with high-achieving peers discussed above, several children viewed friendships with older children as useful. Despite some scholars' claims of age segregation when children made friends in school settings (Montemayor and Van Komen, 1980), it was common to hear younger children refer to older ones, particularly some older children from their previous or current dormitory rooms, as their friends at Central Primary School. To encourage the older children to look after the younger ones, Central Primary School has mixed-age dormitory rooms. Thus, each dormitory room is occupied by children from two different primary years. For instance, in the field, the children in P5 were placed with children in P2. As emerged from these P5 children's narratives about their current interactions with P2 roommates and their memories of sharing rooms with older children in previous school years, these children commonly viewed friendship with older children in

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punishing misbehaving peers, so in many cases, they tried to use the act of recording misbehaviours and deducting points to frighten misbehaved peers into mending their ways. Moreover, because of the feeling of obligation to the collective good (see Chapter 7), it was not just that misbehaved peers and their groupmates might negotiate with student leaders to beg for mercy. As will be discussed in the next section (6.3), because of the Chinese sociocultural idea of mutually exchanging "*renqing*" (favours) in relationship management, student leaders might find it difficult to refuse other peers' appeals for mercy, especially in the case of those peers with whom they had good relationships. However, in comparison to student leaders, teachers' decisions to deduct points to punish misbehaving children were non-negotiable. Such decisions, in observations, were always recorded in pen by student leaders or even teachers themselves in the recording books.

<sup>60</sup> See section 6.3 for discussion of the "gender-biased" student leader system.

the same dormitory room as a useful resource for improving their school experience. For most girls, befriending older girls in the same dormitory room could not only help younger ones to deal with daily housekeeping tasks, such as making the bed and tying up long hair, but could also provide valuable information about matters that were popular amongst the older children, such as a certain paper craft or dress style. The younger children could then show off their advanced knowledge to their same-age peers and thereby improve their own popularity. In comparison to the girls, most of the boys highlighted the value of physical support provided by older boys, referred to as “big brother’s protection”. Yiming, a P5 boy, described the good relationship he had in P3 when sharing a dormitory room with a “big brother” from P5. He spoke proudly of the benefits of his cross-age friendship with this “big brother” as follows:

I heard from some other people who had just entered middle school that the boys in the higher years of the middle school would bully the younger boys. But I was not worried about the bullying issue after I moved to middle school. After I moved to middle school, he [my “big brother”] would be in the third year of middle school<sup>61</sup>, the oldest in the school, and could protect me from being bullied. (14<sup>th</sup> June 2016)

Yiming’s concern about age-related bullying issues was shared by some other P5 boys. Amongst children, age plays an important role in bullying issues. Boulton and Underwood’s (1992) UK-based study suggests that younger pupils at middle school are at risk of being bullied by their older peers. In the United States context, Batsche and Knoff (1994) endorsed this idea on the grounds that younger children are always physically weaker and more vulnerable than older ones. When studying bullying issues in school in mainland China, Zhang and colleagues (2016:119) reported that age is one of the indexes that causes power imbalance between bullies and victims: victims are always bullied by same-age or older peers. However, older peers can also

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<sup>61</sup> Chinese middle school lasts for three years.

protect younger children. In Central Primary School, this point was evidenced in several P5 boys' and a couple of girls' talk about their protection of younger children in their dormitory rooms. Rui, a P5 boy, offered a detailed and typical example:

They [older children] could protect you [younger children] at school, so nobody at your age would dare to bully you... For example, a little one in our dormitory room reported that another two boys in his class bullied him; we went to talk to them and it seems that they are nice to him now... (Field note, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

Through reviewing the results from different countries of involving a peer support system to deal with school bullying, Chan and Wong (2015:105) also commented that 'peer mentoring that involved older students in handling bullying incidents is found to be one of the effective methods in tackling bullying issues at school'. The quality of peer relationships could influence the risk of being bullied, as strong support from peers could decrease the risk (Huang et al., 2013). Therefore, Yiming believed that, when he moved to middle school, his "big brothers" would be in the third year of the middle school and, as the oldest ones among other schoolmates, would protect him from bullying. Although the boys and girls seemed to expect different benefits from their friendships with older children, these older children were viewed by both boys and girls as useful peers in terms of benefitting their relationships with same-age peers and other older schoolmates.

Apart from the above most frequently mentioned "useful" friends, some other types of friends were named as "useful" by a few of the P5 children, such as friends from rich families and friends with particular specialities. However, in children's conversation about all these "useful" friends, regardless of which specific benefits they could offer, the benefits valued by children were all focused on the contribution to their own school experiences, such as status in the class hierarchy and relationships with other peers and teachers. Thus, it might be argued that for some P5 children, befriending certain "useful" children

seemed to be a tactic to ‘seek connections in higher places’ (Fei et al., 1992:65) in the interests of “survival” or to help them to “live better” at school. In such cases of befriending “useful” friends, apart from the instrumental purpose of enhancing the individual’s school experiences, the unequal status between the “useful” friends and the children who looked for “useful” friends is prominent. To put it simply, the “useful” friend, as the party with the capacity to offer the benefits expected by the usefulness-seeking party, seemed to be more “powerful” than the latter. This raises the question of why these “powerful” children agree to befriend those in relatively weaker positions. The following sections will therefore discuss the mutual benefit from such instrumental friendships.

### **6.3 Giving and gaining: mutual benefit in instrumental friendship**

Haseldine (2011) argues that ‘the basis of an instrumental friendship in theory is mutual benefit rather than personal affection’ (p. 253). Other scholars (e.g. Wolf, 2001) agree that it is crucial for the actors in an instrumental friendship to provide mutual support. In the cases of instrumental friendship, although it was relatively less talked about than the commonly discussed benefits of befriending high-achieving children, befriending peers in relatively weaker positions seemed to be “useful” by contributing to high-achieving children’s popularity and status in the class hierarchy. This section mainly focuses on the perspectives of public reputation for moral development and support gained for the student leader’s campaign and tenure.

In chats with high-achieving girls and boys, it was not rare to hear them complain that they were troubled by over-enthusiastic “friendship requests” sent by students with poor academic performance. One common way for these high-achieving children to describe such requests was: ‘these ones with poor academic performance keep fastening themselves on us [high-achieving ones] to ask to do things together’, as stated by Cai, a P5 girl (Interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> June

2016). Although these high-achieving children complained of being pestered by peers with poor academic performance, in most cases, in the observations, they were friendly to those peers. In interviews, a small group of high-achieving boys and girls explained their friendly attitude to peers with poor academic performance. The explanation given by Bing, a P5 girl, was typical:

... she [Jing, a girl with poor academic performance who kept imposing herself on Bing] does not know we [Bing and her high-achieving female friends] do not like her. On the surface, we get along really well. [...] If we show our dislike, some girls in our class will think we are arrogant then dislike us. Especially the ones having good relationships with Jing will dislike us. (Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

Not only Bing, but other high-achieving children as well, commonly expressed their willingness to be good and ideal role models among peers. As discussed previously, the criteria used to evaluate “ideal” Chinese children include not only academic performance and school achievement but also moral development (Xu et al., 2006:273). In Central Primary School, as in other Chinese schools, “*leyu zhuren, tuanjie youai*” (being willing to help others, showing solidarity with and being friendly to each other) was one of the key principles in children’s moral education (e.g., Law, 2006, see Chapter 7). During observations, this phrase was repeatedly used in classes, textbooks and school decorations. Since friendship relations guided by moral norms become a part of children’s moral selves (Keller and Edelstein, 1993), a child’s behaviour in friendships could be used as evidence when evaluating his/her moral development. Therefore, for P5 children, the response to a peer’s “friendship request” matters as a criterion in evaluating one’s own progress in moral development. In this case, if a high-achieving child rejected a “friendship request” from a peer with poor academic performance, he/she might not only displease this peer and others close to this peer, but also place him/herself at risk of being criticized by other peers and teachers for going against the collectivist moral principle and undermining harmony in “class collective” (*ban jiti*) (see further discussion in Chapter 7). For example, not only Bing but also

some other high-achieving children have reported experiences of being criticized as “arrogant”, “looking down upon/discriminating against classmates with poor academic performance”, “breaking solidarity” and “not being friendly to others” in such situations.

Apart from the purpose of avoiding damage to one’s public reputation for good moral character, it seems that high-achieving children’s action of befriending peers with poor academic performance can win them praise for the high moral character thus shown, further contributing to their public reputation. For example, high-achieving children’s agreement to befriend peers with poor academic performance was often recast by both children and teachers as “helping” these peers to improve. Such acts of “helping” other peers to improve was then always used as evidence of one’s good moral character (*pinde hao*) in both talk and formal school paperwork (e.g., children’s Development Record Booklet<sup>62</sup> (*chengzhang jilu shouce*)). Haoran, a P5 boy, was a typical example. Haoran had good academic performance, behaved well and worked as a student leader. In an interview, Haoran said he was happy to play with peers with poor academic performance because:

...[it] can improve *cha sheng*’s [students with poor academic performance] confidence, then to make them feel that they have friends, have classmates to help them. I will be happy, and it can help them to improve their academic performance.  
(Interview, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

Indeed, in observations, Haoran played not only with high-achieving peers but also with those with poor academic performance. He was welcomed by both boys and girls in his class. For example, he was always surrounded by peers

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<sup>62</sup> Each child in Central Primary School has a Development Record Booklet. This booklet is used to record their school performance (*biaoxian*) from Primary Year 1 to 6. In the evaluation part, the booklet includes 4 sections: “my self-evaluation”, “classmates’ comments”, “teachers’ comments” and “parents’ comments”. At end of each semester, getting one’s school performance reviewed by oneself, classmates and teachers, were the last tasks each child needed to finish before the holidays. Then children were asked to bring this booklet back home to be reviewed by their parents. “Parents’ comments” would be checked by teachers at the beginning of the following semester.

and nominated as a friend by many boys publicly and even a small number of girls privately. Among these children, quite a few of them had poor academic performance and relatively low status in the class hierarchy. Many of them particularly highlighted Haoran as a good friend because, as expressed typically by Qingyun, a P5 boy:

Haoran does not like other academically achieved ones to look down upon us [students with poor academic performance] and exclude us, but respects us, plays with us, helps us and befriends us. (Field note, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

Similar comments were also added by some other children in the section of “classmates’ comments” in Haoran’s Development Record Booklet. A good reputation can contribute to children’s popularity among peers, as in Haoran’s case, and gain them more supporters when they compete for awards. For instance, when the vote for “outstanding young pioneers” (*youxiu shaoxianduiyuan*) was held, Haoran had numerous supporters from different “hierarchical groups” in his class (e.g., students with good/middle-ranked/poor academic performance). Apart from help in winning awards, it seems that befriending less-achieving peers can also win high-achieving children more supporters when they run for student leader positions. Although, in principle, student leaders should be chosen by evaluation of whether or not a candidate ‘has good academic grades’, ‘obeys the rules’ and ‘is willing to help others’, in children’s talk, the number of friends a candidate has is an even more crucial factor shaping the election result.

According to the teachers, in order to encourage democracy and child participation, the children’s votes were the most important component in the process of choosing student leaders. As a result, having more friends was beneficial as it meant more votes would be received from these friends, thereby increasing the chances of winning the election. As Ru, a P5 girl, complained, the competition for student leader positions was ‘not a competition about worthiness but a competition for the highest number of friends’ (Field

note, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2016). Thus, in student leader elections, ‘having someone as a friend is a form of power which those without friendships do not have’ (Pahl, 2000:162). For example, both in observations and in children’s talk, when competition arose between a boy and a girl, boys always voted for the boy candidate and girls for the girl candidate; however, if the competition was between boys or girls, ‘the one with more friends in both the boys’ and girls’ groups is always the winner’ as stated by Qingyun, a P5 boy (Field note, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016). Accordingly, as some children claimed, the reason why Cai and Bing<sup>63</sup> could defeat other girl candidates to win core student leader positions in an election was that ‘Ma helped them get some votes from the boys’ (Field note, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2016). Therefore, since friends could serve as an instrumental resource in student leader competitions, offering kindness to win more supporters and thereby maintain their student leader positions might be one instrumental benefit that some high-achieving children expected from instrumental friendship with peers of less achievement.

In addition, instrumental friendship between girl student leaders and ordinary boy students, as in the case of “*toukao nvsheng*” (relying on girls), raises the possibility that these girl student leaders might want to exchange “friendship” for boys’ cooperation and support during their tenure. For example, when discussing why Qian, a core student leader, befriended some boys to provide them with academic support, showing “mercy” in peer supervision (e.g., not reporting their misdeeds to teachers in some cases) and involving them in classroom management (e.g., asking them to help her supervise other boys), Ting, a P5 girl, offered a typical explanation. It was one that was commonly given both by student leaders and by other ordinary students regarding their understanding of the benefits for girl student leaders from befriending boys:

... she is a student leader, so she needs to befriend boys, then,  
when she helps the teachers to supervise these naughty boys,

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<sup>63</sup> As introduced in the previously discussed case of “*toukao nvsheng*”, Cai and Bing were the two ‘powerful’ girls whom Ma (a P5 boy) tried to befriend (see section 6.2).



they would give her “*mianzi*” (“face”) to cooperate. It could make her job easier. (10<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

For student leaders, other ordinary students’ cooperation and obedience to their orders in peer supervision was expected from the perspectives both of willingness to do a good job and also of the valued “*mianzi*”. The previous section 6.2 has argued that “*mianzi*” is closely connected with a person’s dignity. However, as a complex term in Chinese, “*mianzi*” is not only about dignity but also about public recognition of one’s authority (Schoenhals, 2016:80). For student leaders, the representatives of teachers’ authority among peers, other ordinary students’ cooperation and obedience to their orders in peer supervision was viewed as a way of embodying public recognition of and respect for their authority.

Apart from “*mianzi*”, whether or not their fellow students cooperated with their orders directly determined whether or not they could be evaluated as successful student leaders. Effective leadership could increase the likelihood of keeping the position or even being promoted at the next election, while ineffective leadership could end in criticism by teachers or even loss of the position<sup>64</sup>. As a result, as mentioned by most student leaders as well as by some ordinary students, once an election had been won, building up good relationships with fellow students to gain their cooperation in daily supervision work was important to student leaders. However, for girl student leaders, supervising boys was always a difficult task because of a strained and hostile gender relationship between boys and girls. The roots of this situation can be attributed both to the gender separation rule as discussed in Chapter 5 and to the “gender-biased” student leader system.

Amongst the P5 children, “*nvqiang nanruo*” and “*yinsheng yangshuai*” were two common phrases complacently uttered by girls and complained about by

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<sup>64</sup> See Chapter 7 (section 7.3.2).

boys when describing the gender relationship<sup>65</sup> at school. “*Nvqiang nanruo*” means “girls being strong and boys being weak”; “*yinsheng yangshuai*” means “the prosperity of the *yin* and the decline of the *yang*” [in traditional Chinese discourse, women are represented by *yin*, men are represented by *yang*] (Zhang, 2011:192-193, emphasis in original). For both girls and boys, the fundamental reason for this gender relationship was: girls always “*guan*”<sup>66</sup> boys. In the field, most P5 boys complained that teachers favoured girls and gave them too much power to “*guan*” boys. Indeed, in the field, girls occupied the majority of student leader positions in classes. In addition to the student leader positions, many girls were appointed by teachers to provide boys who had relatively weak academic performance and bad behaviour with one-to-one peer support, such as academic support and behaviour monitoring. In this case, girls always exercised power over boys, playing the role of peer supervisor. Similarly to other teachers, a P5 teacher clearly explained that the fundamental reason for appointing more girls than boys as student leaders was that:

Girls are more mature than boys at primary school age and they are more likely to follow the teachers’ words and behave themselves and focus on studying, while the majority of boys still pay too much attention to games and play. (Interview, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2016)

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<sup>65</sup> In Zhang’s (2011) and Hird’s (2016) work, the term “*yinsheng yangshuai*” was also mentioned when introducing a debate over the idea that, in contemporary China, masculinities are in “crisis”. In short, there is an argument that in today’s China, women’s social status has increased because of a series of political, social and cultural changes (e.g., one-child policy; women entering the labour market and challenging men’s role as breadwinners) (Zhang, 2011). However, as some scholars have warned, this does not mean that Chinese females have power over males. Even though the image of ‘successful girls’ at school (Zhang, 2011) and “powerful” wives whose husbands are ‘bossed around at home’ (Hird, 2016:149) seemed to increase the female’s status in gender relations, men in China still hold a dominant position, with the “crisis” of masculinity a matter more of rhetoric than of reality (Zhang, 2011:200). For example, as will be mentioned in Chapter 7, because children still learned many of the ‘old lessons of gender relations which work against gender equity’ (Reay, 2001:164), some P5 girl student leaders might face a dilemma between being powerful student leaders who supervise boys and being gentle and sweet girls in line with traditional social expectations surrounding femininity.

<sup>66</sup> “*Guan*”, as discussed in section 6.2, refers to a hierarchical relationship, carrying the meaning of “supervise”, “monitor” and “control” (Wu, 1996; Wang and Chang, 2010).

Girls get more credit than boys at school as they more closely meet the criteria of a “good” or “ideal” Chinese student through their good academic performance and obedience to school rules (Hadley, 2003; Xu et al., 2006; Hansen, 2015). As noted by Zheng (2017), winning in the competition with male peers to gain student leadership positions brings girls an ‘elite’ self-identification, then empowers them to express their confidence when reflecting on gender relations. Among P5 girls, it seems that when they were appointed to supervise boys, some of them not only gained confidence but tended to show off or even abuse their “power” in their treatment of boys. One of the most common complaints made by almost all boys and tacitly approved by many girls was that girls are very “*xiong*” when they “*guan*” boys. “*Xiong*” means “violent”, “aggressive” and “fierce”. Indeed, in observations, it appeared that, compared to the gentle voices and expressions used by girl student leaders when supervising other girls, many girl student leaders adopted a brusque attitude in dealing with boys. They shouted at them and sometimes even slapped them hard on their arms or backs if they did not quickly respond by following the girls’ orders. In chats not only with girl student leaders but also with other ordinary girl students, almost all P5 girls rationalized this brusque attitude by the idea that ‘boys are naughty; if girls are not “*xiong*”, they will not listen to us and be obedient’ (Field note, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2016). When I questioned in observations why most boys endured this aggressive behaviour instead of fighting back, many girls concluded, with a complacent tone and facial expression, that ‘boys are afraid of girls’ (*nansheng pa nvsheng*). In such a case, it seemed that girls enjoyed such an unbalanced and even hierarchical gender relationship.

This hierarchical gender relationship commonly annoyed boys, as emerged in their narratives as well as their actions. For example, as stated by a certain number of boys, although they did not dare to use the same violent and aggressive tactics against girl student leaders, who readily went crying to teachers, placing boys at risk of serious criticism, they liked to find ways to

annoy these girls. Therefore, in observations, boys were frequently seen to deliberately create difficulties when girl student leaders were carrying out their jobs (e.g., by making ridiculous noises, facial expressions and gestures behind patrolling girl student leaders' backs and arguing with their orders). In such cases, I often witnessed that some girl student leaders became angry with uncooperative boys. To improve the relationship with boys and thus make their own work easier, as suggested by Ting in the previous quotation, some girl student leaders came to view building up friendship with boys as a possible strategy. As in Ting's remarks, Qian's actions in befriending boys and offering them certain benefits (e.g., academic support, "mercy" in peer supervision, and involvement in classroom management) might make the boys feel respected and therefore more inclined to cooperate with Qian's work.

This section (6.3) highlights that through being "useful" friends by providing benefits to other relatively low-achieving peers, high-achieving children can themselves gain some benefit from such friendships. Apart from gaining a social reputation for high moral character, the benefits of gaining more support in elections and cooperation contributing to one's success in student leader positions also points to the rule of mutually exchanging "*renqing*" (favours) (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010; Qi, 2013) in the management of interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) in China. As argued by Qi (2011, 2013), the crucial sense of mutually exchanged "*renqing*" makes Chinese people feel that, in a sensible relationship, it is obligatory for both persons involved to give favours and gain favours in return. Thus, in the case of instrumental friendship between powerful student leaders and other ordinary students, the benefits of offering "mercy" in peer supervision can be understood as the "*renqing*" given by student leaders, while the votes and cooperation obtained to support their work were the "*renqing*" returned by ordinary students.

Although the obligation to give and return "*renqing*" helps to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships in the Chinese context (Qi, 2013), the sense of 'indebtedness' to the person who gives "*renqing*" (Qi, 2013:314) can

sometimes cause problems if the cost of returning “*renqing*” undermines one’s self-interest. This situation can create even more of a struggle if the one who is expected to return “*renqing*” to the assisting person does not feel free to refuse to sacrifice his/her own interest by providing such paybacks, because the assisting person has power over him/her. Looking back at the cases of instrumental friendship among P5 children as discussed above, it is clear that, despite the involved children’s ability to provide mutual benefits and so to be “useful” to each other, they were still not equal. In most cases, the party with higher status in the class hierarchy still has power over the party with lower status. Therefore, the following section will discuss some risks to self’s well-being and interest that the party with lower status in instrumental relationships might experience.

#### **6.4 Exploitation, contempt, and ridicule: risky consequences of an instrumental friendship with power imbalance**

Many scholars cite equality as an essential element of a friendship (Finch, 2007; Morrison and Burgman, 2009). However, it seems that equality is missing in some cases of instrumental friendship. Although in such friendships both sides, to a greater or lesser extent, benefit each other by mutually exchanging “*renqing*”, the relationship between high-achieving children and relatively lower-achieving children can still be hierarchical. As discussed in previous sections, since the high-achieving children were generally powerful and popular amongst their peers, the majority of other children were keen to make friends or at least maintain good relationships (*guanxi*) with them. These high-achieving children might, therefore, have the “privilege” of being able to select friends from a large group of peers, all wanting to befriend them. This would result in the relatively lower-achieving children having to engage in intense competition for the chance to befriend these high-achieving peers. In this process, since the majority of high-achieving ones were clearly aware of their own “privilege”, some of them seemed to take advantage of other lower-achieving peers’ strong willingness to befriend them by ordering them about.

In such a case, in both narratives and observations, it was not rare to notice that some lower-achieving children were exploited and despised by their high-achieving “useful” friends, then ridiculed by other peers for their lowliness.

As summarized by Wenhua, a P5 girl, ‘the high-achieving one feels superior and wants priority for everything, and wants the others to obey’ (Interview, 2nd June 2016). A lot of children, especially those with relatively lower status in the class hierarchy, complained of the demanding behaviour of some high-achieving ones towards them. In the field, in both children’s narratives and observations, it was common to notice that lower-achieving children always needed to please their high-achieving friends by showing obedience when asked to do them favours. For example, in the chat about “*toukao nvsheng*” (relying on girls), Ma and Wei, two P5 boys, both explained that the most effective way to befriend high-achieving girls was to ‘do what they said’ (Interview, 25th May 2016). However, doing the favours asked of them by these girls could go against the boys’ own interests by requiring them to invest their own time and property in the process. For example, Wei reported being asked by girls to help them make paper craft for the Art class:

... They asked me to help them to make the pineapple. I then helped them to make the pineapple, and it took me quite a few days. [...] I did not want to make the pineapple paper craft. [...] It [girls asked Wei to make craft for them] is because they [girls] did not want to buy colourful papers. Then I saved my pocket money. I saved around 50 Chinese yuan; it was saved over two weeks; I bought many colourful papers for them. (Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

Apart from this, in observations, Ma and Wei were seen to give up playing a game when asked by these high-achieving girls to cover the tasks the girls did not like to do, such as mopping the floor and cleaning the rubbish bins. Although, according to Ma and Wei, they were not happy to do such favours, they still agreed to do them almost every time. These boys gave as their reason the expectation that the girls would be annoyed if they refused and that, if they refused often, the girls would replace them by befriending others. They did not

want to lose the benefits of friendship with these powerful girl student leaders, as discussed in section 6.1, above. This concern over losing “useful” friendships was not only disclosed by Ma and Wei in relation to this cross-gender instrumental friendship, but also by quite a few other children. For them, the consequence of losing such “useful” friendships could threaten their “survival” at school.

For example, as discussed in the previous section, connections with older children could shape younger children’s relationships with other peers in the same age group as themselves. In some cases, close connections to older children could protect children from being the victims of bullying<sup>67</sup>. On the other hand, in some cases, such close connections with older children could give children a feeling of having power over their same-age peers, leading them to engage in bullying themselves, as attackers. A P5 girl, Fan, recalled having been bullied by Wenjun, another P5 girl, when they were in P3. According to Fan, because Wenjun had an “older sister” in P6 at that time, she was domineering towards other P3 girls, threatening to ask her “older sister” to make trouble for them if they annoyed her. During that period, Fan shared the same mattress<sup>68</sup> with Wenjun in the first semester of P3. Fan said Wenjun always annoyed her in the evening, demanding Fan to tell her stories before they went to sleep. If Fan refused, Wenjun would threaten her, saying: ‘I will ask my “older sister” in P6 to cause you trouble’. In order to please Wenjun and avoid trouble, Fan therefore decided to befriend Wenjun by agreeing to play the games the latter proposed, sharing snacks with her, and giving her popular items, such as princess stickers, as gifts. According to Fan, after she befriended Wenjun, Wenjun stopped troubling her and was increasingly nice

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<sup>67</sup> As discussed in Yiming’s and Rui’s cases in section 6.1.

<sup>68</sup> As highlighted by Yue and colleagues (2014), the dormitory facilities in most rural boarding schools in China ‘remain under-equipped and services are far below that needed for student development’ (p.1). Indeed, Central Primary School also has a very limited number of dormitory rooms. Although Central Primary School has more than 200 resident students, it has only 10 dormitory rooms. Each dormitory room has 5 to 6 bunk beds for around 20 students, which means that most resident students share a mattress with another same-sex classmate.

to her. However, for quite a long time, she was scared of Wenjun and did not feel free to refuse her requests for fear of being bullied again (Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Therefore, it might be argued that, when friendship became a strategy adopted to “survive” at school, a setting filled with hierarchical relationships (Adler and Adler, 1998; George and Brown, 2000; Stoudt, 2006; Hansen, 2012, 2015), the negative consequences of losing “useful” friendship might be viewed as worse than being exploited in such a friendship.

Apart from Fan’s case, according to other reports dormitory rooms seemed to be a place where exploitation was likely to occur. At boarding schools, the dormitory is a space in which children might experience a higher risk of bullying and exploitation because of the lack of adult supervision there (Yue et al., 2014; Yin et al., 2017). Central Primary School only had two wardens, who stayed in their offices in the left-hand corner of the dormitory building overnight to look after more than 200 resident students. One was a female warden to take care of the girls and the other a male to take care of the boys. In addition, there were other teachers as backup support in emergencies (that is, teachers staying in an on-campus dormitory and four on-duty teachers<sup>69</sup>). However, observations and oral investigations suggest that, unless a child went to these teachers to report an issue or loud noises were heard from the student dormitories, the teachers would normally stay in their rooms after the daily compulsory inspection and several random inspections during the first 30 to 60 minutes of dormitory time. Therefore, once inspections had been completed at the start of dormitory time, if the children controlled their noise levels so as not to be heard by patrolling teachers, the dormitory rooms provided a space free from adult supervision.

As discussed in previous sections, it was not rare for children to befriend the older ones in their dormitory rooms to benefit their network at school. To repay

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<sup>69</sup> One from the school’s leadership group and three class teachers (each class teacher taking care of two primary year classes of residential students).



these “big brothers” and “older sisters”, as mentioned in many children’s narratives of occurrences in dormitory rooms at night, younger ones in the dormitory rooms were always asked to stay awake to guard older children’s “secret play”. Because of the limited free play time in the tightly regulated boarding school timetable (Hansen, 2015) and the excitement of challenging adults’ authority (Corsaro, 2015), many children employed strategies to “create” time to play. Since such strategies always overstepped certain school rules, they would call this activity “secret play”<sup>70</sup>, to be hidden from teachers. In the process of guarding older children’s “secret play” in the dormitory, as detailed by Rui, a P5 boy, younger children needed to take risks:

Sometimes the little ones were wrongly accused by the duty teachers because the teachers heard them when they spoke loudly to warn us teacher was coming. (Field note, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

Similar descriptions of the risks taken by younger children when guarding older ones’ “secret play” were mentioned by many other P5 children when talking about events that took place in their current dormitory rooms, or relating memories of living with older children at school in previous years. In such narratives, they commonly adopted a careless and joking tone, which might suggest that they took younger children’s guard duty for granted. For example, during the above chat, Rui added:

When we were the younger ones, we also did this for our older brothers in our rooms. They are young, so even if they are caught by the teachers, they would just get a telling off, nothing more serious, but they can have good relationships with the older boys. (Field note, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

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<sup>70</sup> According to conversations with the children, “secret play” in the dormitory rooms mostly consisted of “hide and seek” and telling ghost stories after lights-out. Based on the school rule, children were not allowed to talk and play after the lights-out. Otherwise, they would be recorded by patrolling teachers as breaking school rules. They would likely be criticized by teachers, then have points deducted from themselves and their classes under the points-earning/ranking system (see section 6.1).

Based on these older children's talk, it seems that, for younger children, the benefits of establishing a good relationship with the older children was worth taking the risk of being wrongly accused and criticized by teachers. I did not manage to talk with the younger children mentioned as to how they felt about being required to act as older children's guards. However, considering the previously discussed dilemma surrounding refusal of "powerful" friends' requests in the cases of Ma, Wei and Fan, I might surmise that the case was similar for these younger children. Linking this situation to the previously discussed close connection between teachers' criticism, students' feeling of losing face (Schoenhals, 2016), and the negative effect on the evaluation of school performance in the points-earning/ranking system (Bakken, 2000), these younger children were probably under significant stress from the possibility of being caught by teachers. In sum, all the cases discussed above suggest that, in some cases of instrumental friendships, the hierarchical relationship between the involved parties might create a risk of exploitation.

In addition to the risk of exploitation, the feeling of being despised by "useful" friends and experiences of being ridiculed by witnessing peers for their lowliness in such a relationship also troubled a few less-achieving children. Lack of mutual friendship nomination in public places is common in many cases of instrumental friendship. In both narratives and observations, the lower-achieving children were more likely to name the relationship between them and "useful" peers as "friendship" in public spaces. By contrast, although most of the high-achieving children who were valued as "useful" friends often politely but tacitly agreed when nominated as "friends", it was not often for them to enthusiastically nominate the lower-achieving children as "friends". Although there were no straightforward data from children's narratives to explain this phenomenon, children's comments on their peers' everyday interpersonal interactions might suggest some possible interpretations. One interpretation that emerged was that of Wenhua, a P5 girl, who said: 'the high-achieving student often looks down upon the one who doesn't perform well at school'

(Interview, 2nd June 2016). Quite a lot of children commented that, although many high-achieving children did not directly show their contempt for lower-achieving peers because of not wanting to be criticized as arrogant and unfriendly<sup>71</sup>, or because they enjoyed being flattered and followed by these peers as popular students<sup>72</sup>, they in fact ‘despise others with poor academic performance deep in their heart’ (Ouyang, a P5 boy, Field note, 14<sup>th</sup> June 2016). Furthermore, as emerged in previous discussions, being sought after by many lower-achieving peers as “useful” friends, these high-achieving children might not have felt any need to please these peers. Instead, apart from their intimate friends, when in public spaces they tended to nominate as friends other children with similar achievement levels.

Since a relationship is not a dyadic structure between two involved parties but a triadic one, including observers (Herrmann-Pillath, 2010:337), in observations such a lack of nomination made some children sad because of the feeling of being despised by “useful” friends whom they valued, besides losing face<sup>73</sup> in front of other peers. In the crowded school setting, surrounding peers are the significant others, continuously witnessing the practices of relationships happening around them (Thorne, 1993). Returning to the example in Chapter 4 (section 4.3) of Jing’s unsuccessful display of intimacy with Bing, the observations that followed suggest that the friendship with Bing nominated by Jing was likely an instrumental one instead of an intimate one (e.g., Bing provided Jing with academic help and Jing was Bing’s loyal supporter at school). In that example, when Jing displayed her friendship with Bing, Bing withheld a positive response, even going so far as to call Jing’s act of nominating her as a soulmate ‘a joke’. Because of Bing’s rejection and the

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<sup>71</sup> See section 6.3.

<sup>72</sup> These P5 children likely shared a peer culture which valued popularity – being liked or accepted by many peers – as one of a range of important achievements, as noticed by other scholars in Western-based studies of peer culture among preadolescent children (e.g., Corsaro, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4’s section 4.3, following the case of Jing’s unsuccessful friendship display.

other girls' teasing, Jing cried and disclosed to me in the follow-up conversation her feeling of 'being abandoned and looked down on by Bing' (Field note, 13th March 2016). This suggests that being the object of such negative treatment in the process of friend nomination might shame children in relatively weak positions and make them doubt their value to their "useful" friends.

Apart from this hurtful feeling of being despised by "useful" friends, as also suggested in Jing's case, it was not rare to observe and hear about lower-achieving children's experiences of being ridiculed by other peers for their lowliness. For example, "*taohao*" (please), "*bajie*" (flatter), "*mapijing*" (sycophant) and "*goutuizi*" (lackey) were terms frequently used by surrounding peers to ridicule and label those who crossed the hierarchical boundaries drawn by academic achievement (see section 6.2) to befriend peers having higher status in the class hierarchy. Moreover, because of the tension between boys and girls (see section 6.3), boys in friendships of the "*toukao nvsheng*" (relying on girls) type also reported being ridiculed as renegades and even threatened by other boys. The reason lay in their behaviour of befriending girls, which was labelled 'surrendering to girls and losing boys' face' (Wei and Ma, two P5 boys, interview, 25th May 2016).

In sum, this section (6.4) suggests that, in some cases of instrumental friendship, power imbalance between the children might cause those with lower status to have negative experiences of being exploited, despised and ridiculed. Although the children involved in the above-discussed cases of instrumental friendship described those relationships as "friendship", their experiences of exploitation, contempt and ridicule in such relationships might challenge this classification from at least two perspectives.

Firstly, there is a common argument that, in friendships of whatever type, 'friends must respond to the demands of justice: the rightful expectations of the other as an individual of equal worth' (Lynch, 2015:12), to prevent the friendships from being or becoming exploitative (Badhwar, 1987:2). Secondly,

some scholars highlight that, although the instrumental value of each friend to the other is a primary focus in instrumental friendship, it is not the sole focus (Lynch, 2015:12). Affect remains ‘an important ingredient’ in instrumental friendships (Wolf, 1966:13). Krappman (1996:28) also asserts that ‘instrumental friendships do not function without some emotional commitment’. In this case, if a relationship is only instrumental and has no affective basis, it might be inappropriate to conceptualize it as friendship; instead, it might need to be classified as some other type of instrumental-oriented relationship, such as a contractual alliance, association or patron-client tie (Wolf, 1966, 2001; Krappman, 1996; Lynch, 2015). The negative experiences discussed above, such as exploitation along with contemptuous and careless attitudes, suggest that both justice and emotional commitment can be missing in some cases of instrumental friendship. Therefore, it might be argued that the above-discussed cases of instrumental relationships which contain exploitation, contempt and ridicule might resemble an instrumental-oriented alliance or association more than a friendship, especially a healthy friendship, due to the lack of fundamental justice and emotional commitment.

However, the doubt expressed here is not meant to suggest that all instrumental relationships between children and their “useful” friends lacked justice and emotional commitment, thus making questionable their conceptualization as “friendship”. For example, in several P5 children’s stories about “useful” friends, although these “useful” friends were clearly superior to them in school achievements, justice and emotional commitment emerged in their narratives about these “useful” friends’ respectful attitude to them and their own genuine appreciation of these “useful” friends’ generous support (e.g., Haoran’s case). The affectivity involved might make it possible to distinguish this instrumental friendship from other instrumental-oriented relationships, which solely focus on ‘the instrumental value of the interaction’ (Lynch, 2015:12). Moreover, a small group of boys and girls reported that, although the instrumental benefit, such as gaining academic support, was their initial

motive for establishing friendships with some “useful” friends, they came to like each other and became increasingly close as time went on. In these children’s words, on-going interactions, such as exchange of help (*huxiang bangzhu*), gave them many opportunities to spend time together, and in turn to get to know each other well and develop a close friendship (see also section 7.3.1 in Chapter 7). Such examples might suggest a possibility that, since interpersonal relationship is a dynamic process (Adams and Allan, 1998), over time, some instrumental friendships might be “upgraded” to a status more closely resembling intimate friendship. This “upgrade” may occur because in Chinese relationships (*guanxi*), mutual and reciprocal exchange of assistance can function as both instrumental and emotional resources (Qi, 2013:314).

Therefore, as the above discussion suggests, it is important to be aware that children’s experiences of instrumental friendships can be complex. In this case, although children described their relationships with “useful” peers as “friendship”, the “nature” of such instrumental relationships might need to be understood case by case.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter analyses what children said and practised in their relationships with some peers who were characterized as “useful” friends. Since these peers were named as “friends” and such “friendship” was embedded with prioritized instrumental-oriented purposes, such a relationship was referred to as “instrumental friendship” in this chapter.

As seen through children’s narratives and observations, hierarchical imbalance commonly exists among children’s interpersonal relationships with peers. Apart from the hierarchical relationship caused by age (older children vs. younger children), such imbalance was constructed as a result not only of Chinese school settings’ achievement-oriented evaluation preferences (Xu et al., 2006) but also of Central Primary School’s student organizing and

management systems, especially the points-earning/ranking system (Bakken, 2000) and student leader system (Hansen, 2012, 2015). In this case, children's "*biaoxian*" (performance) at school (Bakken, 2000), especially in the aspects of academic competence, disciplined behaviour, and public reputation for moral development (Xu et al., 2006), draws boundaries between children so as to separate them into different hierarchical groups, such as high-achieving, middle-ranked, and low-achieving children. Since children of relatively lower status in the class hierarchy are likely to experience exclusion and marginalization and then to feel powerless at school, befriending more "powerful" peers was commonly viewed by them as a useful way of improving their own school experiences.

This chapter then particularly focuses on cases of instrumental friendship between children and high-achieving peers, especially those with good academic performance and positions as student leaders, and between younger and older schoolmates. It details the support and protection expected by children, who have relatively less achievement and lower status at school, from friendships with "powerful" and "useful" peers. Since the importance of giving and returning favours (*renqing*) in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) is highlighted in the Chinese context (Qi, 2011, 2013), these "useful" friends can also benefit from accepting friendship with these relatively less-achieving peers. To be specific, apart from the valued public reputation (Schoenhals, 2016) for high moral character (Keller and Edelstein, 1993; Xu et al., 2006), these high-achieving children probably gained from such friendships more supporters and more cooperative fellow students to help in maintaining their powerful status in the class hierarchy. In this case, it might be argued that the instrumental friendship, to some extent, could be understood as a strategy to promote children's "survival" or enable them to "live better" at school, a setting fraught with hierarchical peer relationships (Adler and Adler, 1998; Hansen, 2015).

Although both the involved parties in instrumental friendships seem to mutually benefit each other, the relationship between them could still be hierarchical and unjust. Such hierarchical and unjust relationships resulted in some hurtful experiences for children in the relatively weak position in some cases of instrumental friendship. These experiences can include being exploited and despised by friends who have power over them and ridiculed by other witnessing peers for their lowliness in such an unequal friendship. Considering the highlighted necessity of justice and reciprocal emotional commitment in friendships (Badhwar, 1987; Krappman, 1996; Finch, 2007; Lynch, 2015), in these cases of instrumental friendship, the title of “friendship” might give way to the designations of other instrumental-oriented relationships, such as the utility-based association or alliance. However, this does not mean that none of these P5 children’s instrumental relationships can be conceptualized as “friendship”, given that friendship itself can be a complex, multistranded (Pahl and Spencer, 2004) and dynamic (Allan, 1979; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Vincent et al., 2018) relationship. In some cases, instrumental relations showing justice and emotional commitment could actually be friendships; in some other cases, instrumental relations might be able to change into close friendships with the passage of time. Therefore, although this chapter respects children’s choice of words, using “friend” and “friendship” to describe their relationships with “useful” peers, it recognizes the complexity of these relationships and recommends evaluating the “nature” of such “instrumental friendship” on a case-by-case basis.

Although this chapter explores the reasons that encourage high-achieving children to accept the “friend request” of lower-achieving children, it mainly focuses on the benefits to high-achieving children’s personal interests at school. In fact, apart from personal interests, collective-oriented ideas of “collective” (*jiti*), “in-group members” (*zijiren*) and collective interest also frequently emerged in these high-achieving children’s comments about befriending less-achieving peers to help their school performance. Therefore,



the following chapter will show how these collective-oriented ideas shape children's understandings of friendship and decisions within friendships in the context of China's sociocultural norms of collectivism and Confucianism. In that chapter, friendship's instrumental function will be further discussed to argue that the instrumental aspect of friendship is particularly highlighted in the Chinese context because in this context friendship is not only an individual issue but a collective one too.

## **Chapter 7 “Self” (*ziji*), “others” (*taren*) and “collective” (*jiti*): Friendships at school embedded with China’s Confucian-collectivist sociocultural values**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Through discussions in the previous Chapters 4, 5 and 6, it can be seen that friendships’ function of satisfying individuals’ emotional and instrumental needs is prominent. For example, “intimate friendship” with close friends can offer children strong emotional support at school (see Chapter 4); same-gender close friends can instrumentally function as “shelter” to protect children from heterosexual teasing in their romantic adventures (see Chapter 5). “Instrumental friendship” developing between P5 children from different hierarchical groups at school functions as a tactical strategy to benefit individual children’s school experiences (see Chapter 6). However, apart from these individually-oriented functions of friendship, a collective orientation embedded with a range of Confucian cultural norms and collectivist values also emerged in many P5 children’s account of friendships with peers at school.

As many scholars have stated, China is commonly viewed as a country with collectivist values (e.g. Yan, 2005, 2010; Gummerum and Keller, 2008) and Confucian culture (e.g., Wang and Mao, 1996; Gu, 2006; Yu, 2008; Wang, 2011a; Adler, 2011). These collectivist values and Confucian cultural features have a significant influence on Chinese interpersonal relationships (Chow et al., 2000; Lun, 2012; Zhang and Tian, 2014; Triandis, 2018), including Chinese children’s relationships with significant others in their everyday lives, such as classmates, parents and teachers (e.g., Hadley, 2003; Chen et al., 2004; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). Although both collectivism and Confucianism encompass abundant norms and values, in China’s politicized moral education (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004) at school, some values, such as ‘submission of the

individual to the ‘collective’ (Woodman and Guo, 2017:737), work for the collective good, and support to other in-group members, were constructed as those that were consistent with both collectivist and Confucian virtues (Yan, 2005; Yu, 2008; Wang, 2011a).

Therefore, to discuss the influence of such Confucian-collectivist values on these P5 children’s friendships with peers at school, this chapter’s opening section firstly seeks to set up the context by explaining the key Confucian virtues and collectivist values concerning the relationship between “self” (*ziji*) and “others” (*taren*) in China. Then, it describes how Central Primary School embodied such values in its school context through a range of methods.

The second section discusses how the “collective” (*jiti*) concept functions as a “bridge” between in-group members to increase the possibility of friendship establishment, and as a “boundary” between friends when children decide to prioritize the class’s collective interest over their own friendships. In this section, the in-group members referred to are the children’s dormitory roommates, working-group groupmates and classmates. In school settings, Chinese children always identify themselves as members of different groups (Hadley, 2003), such as working groups, playgroups, dormitory rooms, classes, and schools. Among these groups, “dormitory room”, “working group” and “class” (*ban*) are the most important, and these P5 children spent most of their school time with these in-group members to foster the sense of the “collective” (*jiti*). For example, “collective” and class are always combined as one term, *ban jiti* (literally translated as “class collective”) in teachers’ and children’s everyday speech. Corresponding to these important groups, dormitory roommates, working groups’ groupmates, and classmates were the significant in-group members in P5 children’s school lives.

In the Chinese Confucian-collectivist context, children were expected to show obedience to teachers and parents (e.g., Kwan, 2000; Hadley, 2003). Hence the last section shifts its attention from children to the significant adults in their

lives – teachers and parents – to explore how the latter’s methods of educating children on the subject of making friends shape children’s friendship practices at school. It focuses on understanding the key rule – “making more friends, making ‘good’ friends” (*duo jiao pengyou, jiao hao pengyou*) – applied by teachers and parents in educating children. It seeks to argue that, although teachers and parents place emphasis on different factors when educating children, they use the same rule to impart to children a sense of friendship as not only an individual issue but also a collective one. This means that children’s decisions when making friends affect not only themselves but significant others as well, such as teachers and parents, with whom they belong to a same “collective” (e.g., class/school and family).

## **7.2 Confucianism, collectivism and collectivist ideas of the “self”, “others” and the “collective”**

In the field, a collective orientation frequently emerged when almost all these P5 children talked about and dealt with daily interpersonal issues with classmates, such as cooperation and conflict management. For example, among these P5 children, one commonly claimed “rule” that regulated their attitudes and reactions in interpersonal issues with classmates was this: among members of the same group (e.g., class and working group), solidarity (*tuanjie*) and collective harmony (*hexie*) are necessary. This collective orientation can be understood as a product of the specific school context (e.g., long school time and group-based student organizing system) as presented in the previous chapters. In such a school context, a group of children who spend a great deal of time studying, playing and living together at school easily develop a collective orientation (see also Hadley, 2003; Hansen, 2015). Apart from the school context, this collective orientation can be understood as an outcome of the Confucian virtues and collectivist values embedded in these Chinese children’s understanding of the relationship between “self” and “others”.

Confucianism is a complex system: simultaneously a political ideology, a socioeconomic system, and a religious and philosophic tradition (Yao and Yao, 2000). As the keystone of Chinese society, Confucianism has significant long-term implications for that society in both the past and the present (Yao and Yao, 2000; Yu, 2008; Wu, 2014). In terms of Confucianism's implications for Chinese people's understanding of 'self, life goals, and ways of getting along with others' (Lin and Tsai, 1996:158), a collective orientation has emerged. In Chinese traditional Confucian ethics, the notion of "self" 'assumes social intimacy', which highlights 'a dependency of one on the other' (Barbalet, 2014:187). In this case, because of the fundamental Confucian assumption that 'individuals exist in relation to others' (Chen and Chen, 2004:307), China is understood as a 'relation-centered world' (Tsui and Farh, 1997:61). This relation-centred aspect of Confucianism is one of the historical and cultural roots of the crucial interpersonal concept "*guanxi*" <sup>74</sup> (relationships or connections) in China (King, 1991; Tsui and Farh, 1997; Chen and Chen, 2004; Dunning and Kim, 2007). In the process of constructing different "*guanxi*" with others, Chinese learn to make sharp distinctions between 'in-group and out-group relations' (Samter and Burleson, 2005:268) and between "*zijiren*" (insiders/in-group members) and "*wairen*" (outsiders) (Gao, 1998; Wei and Li, 2013). As argued by some scholars, in comparison to the West, Chinese people show 'a much stronger tendency to divide people into categories and treat them accordingly [...] depending on one's relationship to them' (Tsui and Farh, 1997:61). For example, people can feel a moral obligation and interpersonal responsibilities to other in-group members (Stevenson et al., 1990; Bedford and Hwang, 2003; Keller, 2006; Gummerum and Keller, 2008).

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<sup>74</sup> "*Guanxi*" as a crucial and complex concept in Chinese society has been discussed by many scholars (e.g., King, 1991; Tsui and Farh, 1997; Chen and Chen, 2004; Qi, 2013; Barbalet et al., 2015). This concept has been operationalized in research in different ways. For example, in some studies, "*guanxi*" is classified 'depending on the bases upon which it is built' (e.g., family ties); while, in some other cases, "*guanxi*" is classified 'according to the nature and purpose of interactions' (e.g., socio-affective "*guanxi*" for love and belongingness, instrumental "*guanxi*" for material needs) (Chen and Chen, 2004:308-309). In the present case, I summarize "*guanxi*" as a term referring both to "formal" relationships (e.g., family, classmates and friends) and "informal" connections (e.g., acquaintances) between individuals.

Therefore, 'Chinese may go beyond their means to help an insider but an outsider has to follow the rules' (Gao, 1998:165). This tendency to treat insiders and outsiders differently further establishes the importance of building relationships with others in Chinese society (Gao, 1996, 1998; Tsui and Farh, 1997).

In such a 'relation-centered world' (Tsui and Farh, 1997:61), given the great variety of relationships, a collective orientation is required to ensure that all individuals, with their differentiated roles in relationships, behave properly (Chen and Chen, 2004; Wei and Li, 2013). Therefore, in Confucianism, the notion of "self" has been constructed as a dual concept: individual "*xiaowo*" (small self) and collective "*dawo*" (great self). When managing "*xiaowo*" and "*dawo*", there is a collective-oriented emphasis on putting collective "*dawo*" before individual "*xiaowo*" (e.g., Lau, 1996; Barbalet, 2014; Huang, 2016), so that the individual is expected to 'sacrifice oneself for the good of a larger entity, such as family and society' (Lau, 1996:360). This collective orientation is valued in Confucianism for its function of shaping every individual into a harmonious member of society and thus ensuring security, harmony and stability (Wang and Mao, 1996; French et al., 2005; Gummerum and Keller, 2008; Connolly, 2012).

In Confucianism, harmony is valued for its prominent role in maintaining good human relationships (Li, 2008; Wei and Li, 2013). Preserving harmony is then one of the basic "rules" that guide Chinese people's 'interaction manners and norms' (Wei and Li, 2013:62) in everyday relationship management with others (e.g., parents at home, classmates and teachers at school). In the process of achieving harmony, because most Confucian relationships are hierarchical (Yao and Yao, 2000; Barbalet, 2014; Wei and Li, 2013), serving and showing obedience to those with higher hierarchical status to achieve 'harmony within hierarchy' (Bond and Hwang, 1986:213) is particularly highlighted. Thus, individuals are expected to show 'a particular sensitivity [...] to the needs and purposes of the other' (Barbalet, 2014:187), especially when "the other" has a

higher hierarchical ranking. For children, parents and teachers are both significant others with higher hierarchical status in Confucian ethics. Therefore, in relationships with parents and teachers, children are expected to display a respectful and obedient attitude, such as filial piety (*xiaoshun*). Otherwise, they will be criticized. For instance, in everyday conversations between children and parents/teachers, the phrase “*tinghua*” (literally translated as “listen talks”: that is, taking in what their parents/teachers say) is always found within parents’ and teachers’ requirements for children. When a child challenges parents and teachers by arguing, this behaviour is criticized as “*dingzu*” (literally translated as “talk back”); when a child does not follow what a parent or teacher has said, he/she will be blamed for “*bu tinghua*” (“not listen talks”). Both “*dingzu*” and “*bu tinghua*” are viewed as disobedient and non-docile behaviours, disrupting the harmony in relationships between children and parents/teachers (see also Lau, 1996; Gao, 1996, 1998; Tardif and Wan, 2001). Chinese people’s concern for ‘harmony within hierarchy’ (Bond and Hwang, 1986:213) is also closely linked with their valued norm of “*mianzi*” (face)<sup>75</sup> (Tardif and Wan, 2001; Wei and Li, 2013; Schoenhals, 2016). In hierarchical Confucian relationships, “*mianzi*” is ‘accorded greater importance for those of higher status and it is up to those with lower status to ensure that the *mianzi* of one’s superiors is upheld’ (Tardif and Wan, 2001:306). Thus, ‘direct confrontation, contradiction, or refusal’ (e.g., *dingzui*) can be regarded as ‘affronting the “face” of a more powerful disputant’ (Tardif and Wan, 2001:307).

Although the norms, virtues and values of Confucianism are continuously re-constructed and re-interpreted along with China’s changing political, social and cultural contexts (Yao and Yao, 2000; Yu, 2008; Adler, 2011; Wang, 2011a; Wu, 2014), the above-discussed relation-centred, collective-oriented and harmony-expecting understandings of the relationship between “self” and “others” not only survives but also is further strengthened in today’s Chinese

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<sup>75</sup> See Chapter 4, 6 and the following sections 7.3 and 7.4 for discussions of “*mianzi*” (face) in China.

society. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, especially during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, Confucianism, a traditional cultural heritage, was viewed as a product of feudalism and challenged and attacked until its revival in the 1980s (Fan, 2011; Adler, 2011). However, since the late 1980s, for political ends, the importance of Confucianism and traditional culture has been re-emphasized in the "back to traditions" movement (Yu, 2008; Wang, 2011a; Adler, 2011). This revival of Confucianism occurred because, in the late twentieth century, with the changing economy and the increasing influx of foreign values, especially individualism, into China, the Chinese government believed that its collectivist values and social order were being challenged (Yu, 2008).

In sum, the core elements of individualism and collectivism are the assumptions that: 'individuals are independent of one another' (p. 4) in individualism, and 'groups bind and mutually obligate individuals' (p. 5) in collectivism (Oyserman et al., 2002). Accordingly, Tamis-LeMonda and colleagues (2008) state that individualistic values emphasize 'self-growth and individual well-being', while collectivistic values emphasize 'the good of the larger community of which one is a member' (p. 187). Triandis (2018:17) claims that, since "pure" individualism and collectivism are both undesirable social patterns, there is a need to combine them. However, in China's specific political context, Western individualism is not welcomed because it is constructed as 'the ideological enemy of socialist collectivism' (Yan, 2005:652). In China, as argued by Yan (2005), there is a biased understanding of individualism. To be specific, the 'liberalism of modern individualism' is ignored, while individualism is redefined as a focus on utilitarianism alone, and characterized as 'selfishness, lack of concern for others, aversion to group discipline' (Yan, 2005:652). By contrast, collectivism is welcomed by Chinese society. This is not only because of collectivism's roots in the philosophical ground of Confucianism (Wang and Liu, 2010:47), but also because of its reinforcement by the Chinese Communist Party since 1949 as 'the only correct



value' (Ho, 2006:351), which 'has positive connotations, such as enhancing group solidarity' (Wang and Liu, 2010:47).

From this standpoint, in its fight against Western individualism, the Chinese government decided to establish an alliance between Confucian ideas and communist and collectivist ideologies to achieve its goals of 'proper social ordering and harmonious interpersonal relations, the inculcation of community values, and a criticism of individualism' (Yu, 2008: 125). In this process, a range of values, such as collective-oriented solidarity and harmony in interpersonal relationships, which are compatible with both collectivist and Confucian values, were incorporated into the country's moral education scheme (see Chapter 2). For example, in a series of regulations for primary and middle school students<sup>76</sup> issued by the State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China, the key rules for getting along with significant others – parents, teachers and classmates – are largely retained. They include: "filial piety in relationship with parents" (*xiaoshun fumu*), "respect for teachers and elder people" (*zunjing shizhang*), "love for the collective" (*reai jiti*), and "solidarity with classmates" (*tuanjie tongxue*). Apart from launching these regulations, this moral education scheme also promoted model individuals, such as the famous soldier Lei Feng<sup>77</sup> (Yan, 2005, 2010).

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<sup>76</sup> The State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China issued the Regulations for pupils (*xiaoxuesheng shouze*) in 1981; Regulations for middle and high school students (*zhongxuesheng shouze*) and Regulations for pupils' everyday behaviours (*xiaoxuesheng richang xingwei guifan*) in 1991; and Regulations for middle and high school students' everyday behaviour (*zhongxuesheng richang xingwei guifan*) in 1994. In 2004, Regulations for pupils and Regulations for middle and high school students were combined as Regulations for primary and middle school students (*zhongxiao xuesheng shouze*). This combined regulation was then updated in 2012 and 2015.

<sup>77</sup> In Communist legend, Lei Feng was a Chinese army soldier who was heralded as a moral role model for collectivism in China after his death in 1962. At Central Primary School, Lei Feng's spirit, as epitomized in his stories, is often used as a model to contribute to the children's understanding of how to be a good person for the collective. Lei Feng's spirit could be summarized in the expressions 'finding happiness in helping others', 'selfless sacrifice', and 'dedication' (Bannister, 2013). Moreover, Lei Feng is constructed as a role model not only for collectivist values but also for Chinese traditional cultural values, including Confucian moral virtues (Zhong, 2013).

Because of China's top-down, centralized education system, these ideas of moral education and its relevant materials (e.g., course design, regulations and individual models) serve as guidelines and directives for China's numerous schools (Yu, 2008:125). Central Primary School, like other Chinese schools, embodies Confucian virtues and collectivist values in its everyday moral education. It not only has a formal moral education course called Morality and Society (*pingde yu shehui*), and a series of reading books on morality (*liyi duben*), but also represents Confucian virtues and collectivist values in the school's decorations. On the walls of the central stairwell in the main teaching building there are ten pictures of Lei Feng alongside his stories about serving other people and contributing to the collective good; one copy of the Regulations for primary and middle school students (*zhongxiao xuesheng shouze*); and seven pictures displaying quotations on topics such as "hardworking study" and "relationships with parents, teachers and others"<sup>78</sup> from the *Di Zi Gui* and the *Sanzi Jing*. These two Confucian classics of child education detail the standards of the good student and the good child. In all classrooms, apart from each classroom's own decorations (e.g., handcrafts and displays of children's writing and drawing), there are four shared decorations. These are: the flag of China (the Five-starred Red Flag); a copy of the Core Socialist Values (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*)<sup>79</sup>; a frame designed and decorated to hold the class's collective awards (e.g., "outstanding class" (*youxu banji*) in the school level's points-earning/ranking

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<sup>78</sup> For example, one of the quotations is '*fumu hu, ying wuhuan; fumu ming, xing wulan; fumu jiao, xu jingting, fumu ze, xu shuncheng*' from the "*Di Zi Gui*". It can be translated literally as: when parents call you, you need to respond without delay; when parents ask you to do something, you need to act without indolence; when parents teach you, you must listen and take it in; when parents blame you, you must be docile. It is an example that summarizes children's expected attitude towards parents and teachers. In fact, to some extent, in the Chinese context, teachers can be regarded as having authority and status equal to that of parents (Hu, 2002; Bi and Fang, 2018). For example, "*yiri weishi, zhongshen weifu*" is a widely-used saying which means "being a teacher for only one day entitles one to lifelong respect from the student that befits his father", as translated by Hu (2002:98).

<sup>79</sup> The Core Socialist Values include 12 values, representing a set of official interpretations of Chinese socialism. It was promoted at the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. Among them, "harmony" (*hexie*) is highlighted as a national-level value and "being friendly" (*youshan*) is emphasized as an individual-level value.

system as discussed in Chapter 6), which is labelled the “Class’s Collective Honour” (*banji rongyu*); and printed quotations from the “Regulations for primary and middle school students”. In P5 (1), the quoted words are “solidarity” (*tuanjie*), “being friendly” (*youai*), “studying hard” (*qinxue*), and “following rules” (*shouji*). These four shared decorations are printed in large sizes and placed above and around the blackboard as the most appealing visual features in the classroom.

Besides involving these Confucian virtues and collectivist values in the teaching content, children’s textbooks and school’s decorations, Central Primary School runs various moral educational activities, such as an annual project in March called Learning from Lei Feng Month. In the 2016 Learning from Lei Feng Month, the children wrote essays about what they had learnt from Lei Feng’s spirit. One of these is quoted below because it represents the majority of the children’s points about the relationships between “self”, “others” and the “collective” to which they all belonged:

[...] I will learn from Lei Feng to try my best to do all things, to selflessly help my classmates, to actively participate in events organized by my class and the school to win more points for my working group, my class, and my school... I will learn from Lei Feng, to work with my classmates to build up a better class and contribute to helping our school to become better and better. (Yiming, a P5 boy, March 2016)

In this quotation, as in other children’s essays for the Learning from Lei Feng project, the frequent occurrence of the words “my group/class/school” indicates these P5 children’s strong sense of identifying the “self” with the “collective” to which the “self” belongs, and emphasizes the self’s commitment to the collective good. Also, classmates are highlighted as a group of significant “others” who matter as “in-group members” constituting a shared collective, and with whom the child cooperates to contribute collective benefit.

In sum, section 7.2 has provided a glimpse of how Chinese Confucian virtues and collectivist values construct the relationship between “self”, “others”, and

the “collective” in human relationships. It highlighted the collective orientation and the expectation of harmony as two significant rules that regulate Chinese people’s interpersonal interaction, manners and norms in China’s relation-centred society. Therefore, based on this discussion of the Chinese sociocultural context, the following sections 7.3 and 7.4 will detail how such collective orientation and expectation of harmony shape these P5 children’s experiences of friendships with peers at school.

### **7.3 The idea of the “collective” (*jiti*) in children’s friendship experiences**

As noted by Hadley (2003), in Chinese classrooms, because of the collective orientation in Chinese culture, teachers educate children to foster and maintain ‘a collective sense of identity’ (p. 199) by making them work together as a group. During my fieldwork, these P5 children were also encouraged to work as groups (see Chapter 6). Consequently, in the children’s everyday talk in the field, “dormitory room”, “working group” and “class” commonly emerged as the most significant groups which fostered the sense of the “collective” (*jiti*). Dormitory roommates, working group groupmates and classmates are therefore identified as crucial “*zijiren*” (in-group members) in the children’s everyday school lives<sup>80</sup>. As discussed in the previous section 7.2, Chinese people tend to treat “*zijiren*” (in-group members) and “*wairen*” (outsiders) differently (Gao, 1996, 1998; Tsui and Farh, 1997; Samter and Burleson, 2005). Therefore, when children deal with relationships with peers, whether or not such peers are in-group members of the same “collective” can be an influential factor. This section will focus on how the idea of the “collective” (*jiti*) functions

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<sup>80</sup> It is noted that all working group groupmates and the majority of roommates (see Chapter 6 for the age-mixed dormitory arrangement) in the dormitory are classmates from the same class. But here I have distinguished roommates, groupmates and classmates as a way of showing respect to the children’s original wordings. These P5 children always chose different words to highlight different collective identities that they shared in different conversational contexts. For example, when talking about issues between classes, they identified themselves and other in-group members as “classmates”; while when discussing topics related to in-class competition, they used “groupmates” to indicate the collective identity they shared with in-group members.

as both a “bridge” and a “boundary” in friendships between children and their peers at school.

### **7.3.1 Shared identity as a member of the “collective” functions as a “bridge” between individuals**

In the field, when nominating friends, all P5 children chose the majority of their friends from their own classes. Furthermore, in their narratives about friendships with friends in their classes, quite a lot of them shared with their friends a collective sense of identity not only as classmates but also as groupmates and/or dormitory roommates in the process of creating their friendships. It emerged from these children’s narratives and my observations that such a shared collective sense of identity, giving them the status of “in-group members” (*zijiren*) in the “collective” (*jiti*), then functions as a “bridge” to bring individuals together and so contributes to the creation of friendships.

As in-group members of a shared “collective”, children have abundant opportunities to engage in frequent interactions. Children in the same working group can be used as an example. At Central Primary School, as described in Chapter 6, children in a working group are required to participate in all school tasks together as a group. Hence, they were always spatially close to each other during school time. They were seated together by teachers in the classroom and the canteen, besides queuing up together to take meals and attend the school’s daily gymnastic exercises. Consequently, apart from formal interactions to carry out school tasks (e.g., working on a group academic project), this spatial closeness caused children in the same working group to easily develop frequent casual and fun interactions<sup>81</sup>. For example, in classroom-based observations during class break times, it was very often observed that some children stayed in their seats to engage in chat and brief games with peers sitting near them, who were very likely groupmates. These

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<sup>81</sup> The importance of casual and fun interactions, such as play, in friendship has been discussed in Chapter 4.

children explained that they preferred to play with those sitting nearby when they felt too tired to move or had only a short break time (e.g., 10 minutes break times between classes). As noted by Corsaro (2003) and Carter and Nutbrown (2016), sharing activities and interactions on a daily basis over a period of time is a very important part of children's friendship-forming processes. Therefore, as noted by many P5 children, these frequent interactions between them and their groupmates created opportunities to get to know each other well and then to befriend the ones they liked.

Furthermore, among these children's narratives about the creation of friendships with peers who were working group groupmates and/or dormitory roommates, the "deskmate" (*tongzhuo*<sup>82</sup>) and the roommate with whom they shared mattresses (see Chapter 6) were particularly emphasized by several children as the ones with whom the groupmate relationship and/or roommate relationship progressively developed into intimate friendship. One reason that these particular in-group members were special could be that deskmates and the roommates with whom children share mattresses are even closer to them spatially, which might make it even easier to notice their needs and offer support. For example, as recalled by Ting and Zilin, two P5 girls who shared a mattress, the mutual emotional support they offered each other at night was one important factor encouraging the progression of their relationship from that of roommates to that of intimate friends. As discussed in Chapter 4, these P5 children regarded the display of negative emotions (e.g., crying) in a public area (e.g., classroom) in view of many peers as improper and shameful behaviour. Therefore, crying quietly under the duvet in the evening was commonly reported by these P5 children as a way of releasing negative emotions. This is true in the case of Zilin and Ting. As Zilin explained, since Ting was a child of migrant parents, she sometimes cried under the duvet when

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<sup>82</sup> In P5 classrooms, children's seats were structured as six columns and four rows, separated by three narrow aisles. Since each two columns were put together, each child's desk was put with another peer's desk in the row. As discussed above, since children in the same working group are seated together, the "deakmate" is very likely also a groupmate.

she missed them. In these situations, Zilin said that she would always ‘comfort her by using my hands to stroke her back upward and downward [...] quietly and keep it [Ting’s cry] secret [from other peers]’ (Field note, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2016). Since Ting offered Zilin similar emotional support when she was upset, these two girls increasingly developed a feeling of shared emotional intimacy, as the ‘ones who were always there for each other’, even at night (Field note, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2016). In other stories about developing intimate friendships with deskmates, children frequently attributed their emotional intimacy to appreciation of their deskmates’ role of promptly noticing their difficulties (such as running out of pens, finding coursework difficult, or feeling unwell) and responding quickly to support them. These examples provide further evidence that spatial closeness between in-group members of a shared “collective” can contribute to the establishment of friendship.

Apart from the above-discussed positive influences of spatial closeness and frequent interaction, a sense of having an obligation to take care of other in-group members promotes the creation of friendship between children and peers in the same “collective”. In China’s ‘relation-centered world’ (Tsui and Farh, 1997:61), its Confucian-collectivist culture (Hau and Ho, 2010) expects members of the “collective” to be aware of their obligation to commit to serving other in-group members, to show care and concern for other in-group members, and to be responsible for those in-group members’ accomplishments and difficulties (Stevenson et al., 1990; Keller et al., 1998; Hadley, 2003; Yu, 2008; Gummerum and Keller, 2008). This interpersonal responsibility between in-group members is viewed as a moral obligation to others, in keeping with China’s system of moral rules (Stevenson et al., 1990; Keller 2006), and with the model of Lei Feng as an ideal individual in China’s moral education system (see section 7.2).

In the field, these P5 children commonly showed internalization of the need to perform such interpersonal responsibility by “caring about” (*guanxin*) and “helping” (*bangzhu*) other in-group members through both words and actions.

An episode in which children spontaneously raised money for Tao, a P5 boy, is evidence of this. It was chosen as an example because, as a significant episode taking place over the course of days, involving all children from Tao's class and some children from other classes, it gave me more opportunities than other, similar episodes to combine my observations with follow-up chats with children.

Tao's family had suffered hardship when his father required urgent medical treatment in February 2016. Two months in hospital and the initial surgery cost Tao's family more than 300,000 Chinese Yuan (approximately equal to 30,000 British pounds). Because the result of the first surgery showed that it had not been fully successful, Tao's father needed to undergo a second operation. As rural people with a limited income earned from growing vegetables, Tao's family could not afford the second expensive operation. When one classmate, who comes from the same village as Tao, learnt about the family's hardship from his parents, he spread this sad news in class. Then, on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2016, the children from Tao's class spontaneously raised money for Tao. This collection involved all Tao's classmates as donors and many of them as enthusiastic fund-raisers as well. Children in Tao's working group undertook most of the work of organizing the collection. These groupmates helped Tao to count the amount of donated money, to record the names of donors, along with the amount of money each had donated, and to maintain order among the donors (e.g., by encouraging them to form a queue and donate one at a time). In addition to Tao's working groupmates, many other Tao's classmates acted as fund-raisers after making their own donations. For example, they used their networks at school to ask children from other classes to donate to Tao. In this process, the way they most frequently phrased the request for donations was: 'Tao in my class is experiencing hardship now. Can you donate to help him?' Moreover, children from different classes but in the same dormitory room, clubs, or village as Tao also donated and raised funds through their own networks at school. In their donation requests, Tao was defined as a member



of their dormitory room, club or neighbourhood. Through such fund-raising, in the end, Tao received donations not only from all Tao's classmates but also from some children from different classes (Field notes, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> March).

In follow-up chats with children who were enthusiastically engaged in supporting Tao, the most common answer to questions about their motivation for caring about and helping him was 'Tao is "one of us" (*women zhongde yiyuan*)'. The phrase "one of us" straightforwardly suggests a collective recognition of Tao's identity as an in-group member of a "collective" to which they belonged in common with him (e.g., class, working group, dormitory room, club, or neighbourhood). Another significant characteristic of their motivation that emerged in chats was that it was most likely morality-driven. For example, when I thanked them for their kindness, apart from the phrase "This is what we should do", a moral idiom "Helping others makes one happy" (*zhuren weile*<sup>83</sup>) was frequently offered by many of them to modestly downplay their kindness. Of course, it might be argued that such a reaction represented an attempt to seem like the "ideal" child who 'has high moral character, and is prosocial, group-oriented, and modest' (Xu et al., 2006:273). Nevertheless, the moral character that emerged cannot be denied, as it could also be observed in their other reactions. For example, such a morality-driven orientation can be recognized in some children's altruistic attitude towards exchanging favours (*renqing*), and reciprocity (*huibao*) between themselves and Tao. As emerged in Chapters 4 and 6, in Chinese relationships such as friendship, the exchange of favours and reciprocity are crucial elements (see also Qi, 2013). However, in observations, when Tao announced to the donors that he would repay their kindness and insisted on recording their names, not all donors agreed. Some of them just dropped the money on Tao's desk quickly, then disappeared into the crowd. Others refused with the words "You do not need to; this is what I should do". Besides these observed reactions, according to Tao, in the

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<sup>83</sup> As introduced in section 7.2, "Helping others makes one happy" (*zhuren weile*) is one core moral virtue highlighted in accounts of Lei Feng's spirit (Bannister, 2013; Zhong, 2013) in the Chinese moral education scheme.

following days, he kept finding anonymously donated money in his desk drawer. Moreover, according to Tao's class teacher, some children from other classes, who could not enter Tao's classroom, asked her to add their donations anonymously to the collection<sup>84</sup> because they did not want Tao to feel he owed them something (Field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> March). Therefore, it could be argued that, although Chinese relationships, such as those between classmates, are generally viewed more in terms of reciprocity than of obligation (Zhang and Zhang, 2006), the sense of being "in-group members" (*zijiren*) of the "collective" (*jiti*) under the Confucian-collectivist values system (Hau and Ho, 2010) could give these Chinese children a morality-driven feeling of being obligated and having a responsibility to help other in-group members to cope with their personal difficulties.

As discussed in the last section of Chapter 6, in Chinese relationships, offering assistance can serve not only instrumental but also emotional functions (Qi, 2013). In the process of helping a group member in need, the relationship between the children involved might be strengthened (Zhang and Zhang, 2006) with a stronger emotional bond. In some cases, this added affectivity can upgrade an ordinary interpersonal relationship (e.g., a classmate relationship) to a more intimate one, such as friendship. Such upgrading is evident not only in the above-discussed case of Zilin and Ting but also in that of Tao. For example, Tao nominated a couple of male groupmates as "friends who warm me in my difficult time" in the following week's weekly Chinese course essay; in observations, their interactions at school became closer, as suggested by signs such as increasing frequency of interaction and intimate body language.

Upgrading of relationships from in-group membership to friendship not only happened between same-gender peers. A couple of children told stories of developing cross-gender friendships with other opposite-gender in-group

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<sup>84</sup> Because children have no lockers at school, to protect the money, Tao asked his class teacher to help him to keep it until he was picked up by his family on the following Friday afternoon.

members. In these stories, cooperating in tasks for the collective interest prominently functions as a powerful source of “teasing-free interactions<sup>85</sup>” between children and their opposite-gender friends. For example, two P5 girls, Qian and Taozi, related how they both had the opportunity to build friendships with a couple of male classmates in the process of cooperating with them during the training courses for cross-school academic or sports competition events. In these courses, the girls and boys got to know each other while spending a lot of after-class time together. However, the girls were rarely teased by other peers about these interactions because the interactions were for a reasonable and honourable purpose – winning class and school collective awards, and peers who made fun of their cooperation with males would be criticized by teachers.

Besides these stories that children shared about cross-gender friendship, in the field I very often observed cross-gender cooperation taking place when boys and girls needed to serve the collective interest. For example, such cooperation was seen when girl student leaders noticed that some boys had “disappeared”, leaving behind unfinished coursework and other daily duties. Since children competed not only over the results of tasks but also over the speed with which they finished them<sup>86</sup>, the girl student leaders would immediately start to search for the boys. In many cases, the boys had “hidden” in toilets and dormitory rooms to play. Since toilets and dormitory rooms were viewed as gendered areas with entry forbidden for opposite-gender peers, I sometimes saw or heard boys laughing inside the gendered “safe-zone” while the girls stood outside, trying different approaches to bring them back, such as threatening to report their misdeeds to the teachers. Sometimes, these boys

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<sup>85</sup> See Chapter 5 for heterosexual teasing faced by children in cross-gender interactions.

<sup>86</sup> In the points-earning/ranking competition system (see Chapter 6), “doing tasks fast and well” was a valued rule. For example, for coursework, the teachers not only awarded each working group different points according to the average level of quality of their members’ work, they also awarded points for speed of submission. To be specific, the first working group who collected all members’ coursework and submitted it to the teacher’s office was awarded 4 points, the second one was awarded 3 points as so on (Field note, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

did come back from the “boys’ area”, but at other times they did not. In such a case, it was common to see some other boys in the same working group taking responsibility for “catching” the hidden boys and extracting them from the “boys’ area” for the girl student leaders. By behaving in this way, these boy group members were helping the girl group leaders to avoid the risk of losing the group’s collective points.

These stories about cross-gender friendship and cooperation not only support the previous discussion of how the idea of the “collective” contributes to the creation of friendship between in-group members, but also suggest that, in some cases, the “collective” principle might challenge certain “rules” of interpersonal interaction, such as gender separation (see Chapter 5). However, since the gender group can also be understood as a significant unit in which children fostered a sense of the “collective”<sup>87</sup> (Snow, 2001), this argument does not imply that children always prioritize class or working group over gender group. In fact, through combining these episodes of cross-gender cooperation with children’s hostile attitudes towards opposite-gender peers, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, we can be aware that children’s identities performed in interactions and relationships with others are ‘multi-dimensional’ and are ‘never a final or settled matter’ (Jenkins, 2008:7). For example, when children showed a hostile attitude towards opposite-gender peers, they highlighted their gender identity to view those peers as “outsiders” (*wairen*) of their own gender group. However, in the above examples of cross-gender cooperation, the children highlighted their identity as members of a shared working group, with an obligation to support opposite-gender groupmates and so to contribute to the group’s collective good. Therefore, these children’s

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<sup>87</sup> If gender is understood as another significant unit contributing to the sense of the “collective”, it is likely that boys and girls would be expected to support their gender group’s collective good. This might further support understanding of other boys’ anger towards the boys who were involved in cases of “*toukao nvsheng*” (relying on girls) as discussed in Chapter 6. The reason is that, because “*toukao nvsheng*” was viewed as “surrendering to girls”, which causes boys to lose face (see quotation in section 6.4 in Chapter 6), boys who did this were viewed as undermining the boy group’s collective good.

complex, varying and even contradictory behaviours can be understood as outcomes of the children's respective emphases on different identities operating in different situations.

In sum, this subsection discusses how the idea of “collective” (*jiti*) functions as a “bridge” to link individual in-group members together and strengthen their interpersonal relationships, with a consequent positive influence on the establishment of friendships between in-group members. However, this does not mean that the “collective” (*jiti*) idea can always benefit individual children's friendships at school. In fact, in some cases, the idea of prioritizing the “collective” (*jiti*) over the “individual” (*geren*) might create boundaries between friends.

### **7.3.2 How does the idea of prioritizing the “collective” (*jiti*) over the “individual” (*geren*) shape friendships between individuals?**

As discussed in section 7.2, in Confucianism, the collective “*dawo*” (great self) is placed above the individual “*xiaowo*” (small self), which means that individuals are expected to submit themselves to the “collective” (Lau, 1996; Barbalet, 2014; Huang, 2016). This collective orientation is further strengthened by the Chinese Communist Party in its process of propagandizing collectivism as the only correct social value (Yan, 2005; Ho, 2006; Yu, 2008; Wang and Liu, 2010). As children growing up in such a context, the idea of prioritizing the “collective” (*jiti*) over the “individual” (*geren*) can influence their peer friendships at school. This subsection first discusses how this idea creates a “boundary” between children and friends when they belong to different groups with conflicting interests. Then, it focuses on student leaders as a specific group of children whose collective-oriented duties can restrict their friendship experiences.

The points-earning/ranking competition system (see Chapter 6) strengthens competition and tension between groups, inducing a sense of “my group” and “other people's groups” among children. Thus, in the field, I have observed

episodes of conflict arising between friends when they belonged to different groups (e.g., working group and class) with conflicting interests as competitors. Among these episodes, the occurrence of 13<sup>th</sup> May 2016 is a typical example. It illustrates not only conflicts between friends from different classes but also cross-gender cooperation between boys and girls in the same class. Therefore, besides being used as evidence of the present argument, it can echo the point made previously, in section 7.3.1, about how the ideas of the “collective” and “in-group members” challenge the gender separation rule to bring boys and girls together in the collective interest.

On 13th May 2016, during the dinner break, I was invited by P5 (2) girls to go to the dancing room to observe their rehearsal of the dancing programme for the “2016 Children’s Day Show”. In China, June 1st is Children’s Day. As tradition dictates, the school would organize an entertainment event called the “Children’s Day Show”. Each class was required to prepare an entertainment programme (e.g., dancing, singing and drama) to perform in the show. After the show, teachers selected the three best performances and awarded points to the classes to which those performers belonged. Since the points contributed to a class’s performance at the school level (see Chapter 6), children were very excited and eager to help their own class prepare an outstanding programme. Since 10th May, in preparation for the Show, a group of girls in P5 (2) had been practising a dance routine in the dancing room during the long break time between dinner and evening self-study. This dancing room was constructed as a “boy-free” area because all the girl dancers claimed that they felt embarrassed when making certain physical movements, such as stooping down or jumping high, in front of the boys, as they thereby risked exposing their bodies (see also Cockburn and Clarke, 2002). Therefore, these P5 (2) children devised several strategies to ensure that the girls had a comfortable environment in which to practise. For instance, they had classmates stand guard to protect the dancers from the boys, as outlined in this example.

When I arrived, I found that the girls had already started their practice. I was surprised to see Wei, a P5 (2) boy, sitting in the hallway outside the dancing room window. When I chatted with Wei, he explained his role as a “guard”, with a duty to ‘stop all the boys and girls from the other classes coming up to the window’. He did this for two reasons: to ‘protect girls in my class [because] some boys like to watch them’ and to ‘protect our class’s programme from being learned by other people in other classes [because] the competition is intensive’. While we were chatting, four boys from P5 (1) and two boys from P5 (2) appeared on the stairway. Ouyang, a P5 (1) boy, was among them. He and Wei were mutually nominated close friends, who had begun their friendship when they were in kindergarten<sup>88</sup>. Since the dancing room was just next to the stairway, when Ouyang saw Wei and me and heard the music from the dancing room, he laughed and shouted: ‘Some people are dancing!’ Then he started to walk towards the dancing room, followed by the other boys. Wei shouted: ‘Do not come! You cannot see! It is my class’s girls in practice.’ Then he stretched out his arms to try to block the hallway and stop the boys from passing. However, it was difficult for Wei to block all these boys by himself, so he shouted angrily at these two P5 (2) boys: ‘What’s wrong with you? Come and help! Aren’t you still one of our class?’ When the two boys heard this, they turned around to help Wei stop other P5 (1) boys. At this point, Ouyang looked at Wei and said: ‘We are all brothers; just allow me to see it for one second!’ But Wei continued to refuse, saying firmly: ‘No, they are girls in my class.’ The disturbance involving these boys attracted the attention of other children passing down the stairway. More and more children from different classes started walking curiously towards the dancing room. Wei became flustered; he knocked on the window and shouted: ‘People are coming!’ The girls in the dancing room stopped practising immediately, opened the window and angrily shouted at the children outside, saying that they would report them all to teachers if they did not leave. I noticed Ouyang’s upset facial expression and the angry glance he gave Wei over his shoulder as he left (Field note, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

In this episode, Wei’s reactions, such as warning and stopping P5 (1) boys and demanding that other P5 (2) boys support him by reminding them of their collective identity as members of class P5 (2), suggested his strong emphasis

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<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 4 for the importance of being an old friend in intimate friendship.

on his identity as a member of P5 (2). Therefore, from Wei's perspective, although Ouyang was his friend, Ouyang was also a boy who was unwelcome in this "boy-free" dancing room, and a member of another "class collective" (*ban jiti*) which was a competitor in the Children's Day Show. In this case, allowing Ouyang to see the girls' dance risked not only embarrassing the girls and disturbing their practice but also leaking the details of P5 (2)'s programme to P5 (1). Thus, even though Ouyang tried to convince Wei to make an exception on the grounds that they were 'brothers', Wei's attitude did not change, as indicated by his firm refusal to Ouyang. Wei's choice of sticking to his role of guard rather than making an exception for Ouyang as a 'brother' suggests that he prioritized P5 (2) class's collective interest over his individual relationship with a friend. And since Wei's behaviour of prioritizing the "collective" (*jiti*) over the "individual" (*geren*) disappointed his friend Ouyang, their friendship could, to some extent, be influenced negatively.

The above observation also helps to explain why interactions between friends from different classes decreased during the period of preparation for the Children's Day Show. During the fieldwork, even though many children were in different classes from some of their friends, they developed friendships as neighbours, previous kindergarten classmates, or members of the same school clubs, and so on. After class, children were frequently observed running to other classrooms to visit their friends for a chat or to play in the hallways together. However, the frequency of visits between friends from different classes dropped significantly during the period of preparation for the Children's Day Show, from the middle of May to the 1st of June. During this period, the hallway remained relatively quiet and empty after class, with the children spending more time in their own classrooms, doors shut and curtains drawn, discussing and practising their programmes. This action might be understood in the light of Wei's comment that he had to prevent people in other classes from learning about his own class's ideas for the show. In that case, the children would tend to keep at a distance from friends from other groups to



avoid any suspicion that their close interactions were undermining their own class's collective interest. Thus, it might be argued that the collectivist attitude of working towards the collective good of one's own group can create a "boundary" between friends from different groups.

In the field, apart from these episodes related to Children's Day, some other episodes also reflected the negative influence on individuals' peer friendships of the value of prioritizing the "collective" (*jiti*) over the "individual" (*geren*). In these situations, a particular group of children – student leaders – emerged as significant. This is a group of children whose job as teachers' assistants in the daily management of the class and peer supervisors of fellow students (see Chapter 6) required them to give priority to the class's collective good and service to teachers and other classmates (see also Hansen, 2015). Therefore, as several student leaders complained, this position, in some cases, threatened their relationships with friends. For example, Qian, a core P5 student leader, cried in my presence a couple of times when complaining about the stress she experienced after being chosen as a core student leader. She said:

[...] I know many people complain that I am bossy and rude when supervising people, but I do not want to be like this, I was not like this before! I just have to be like this because I have to do the job as the student leader to supervise people. They would not listen to me, especially the naughty boys, if I was a soft girl. (Field note, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2016)

Although Chapter 6 discussed how this job made student leaders powerful and popular among peers, one needs to be aware of the other side of the coin: that the job might give student leaders a burdensome responsibility as well. In this example, Qian's role of student leader requires her to supervise her fellow students for the class's collective good: for instance, to ensure a good performance in the inter-class points-earning/ranking competition system. When performing this role, Qian was annoyed by peers' complaints that she was "bossy and rude" during peer supervision. This was not only because

children in collectivist or group-oriented cultures can be highly sensitive to peer evaluations (Chen et al., 2006:11), but also because such peer-impressions hampered her peer relationships, including friendships. For example, according to conversations with a couple of girls who had previously been very close friends with Qian, it seems that Qian experienced friends' estrangement after being appointed a core student leader. According to these girls, since Qian had become more and more aggressive and bossy, they felt uncomfortable around her. Fan, a P5 girl, referred to Qian's 'changed temperament' to explain why her friendship with Qian was no longer as intimate as it had been in previous years. Fan said:

When Qian shouts at the boys, the voice, I can't do the voice, it is super loud and scary. I am afraid of her now. She was not like this when I first met her. She used to be a very gentle girl.  
(Field note, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2016)

In the field, although these P5 children commonly claimed that the relation of boys to girls among them was "*nvqiang nanruo*" ("girls being strong and boys being weak") (see Chapter 6), that does not mean that these girls totally escaped from Chinese traditional patriarchy. In fact, some traditional social expectations defining women's virtue still influenced these P5 girls' construction of "proper" characteristics for girls, such as softness and obedience (Zheng, 2017). For example, apart from what they were taught by teachers, among P5 children gentleness of temperament (*wenrou*) was commonly highlighted as a desirable personal characteristic of girls (see Chapter 5) not only by boys but also by many girls themselves. Therefore, even though being a student leader could bring girls elite status and confidence in front of male peers, the process of performing this authoritative role could cause pressure and isolation to girl student leaders in the Chinese context<sup>89</sup> (Zheng, 2017). In Qian's case, her changed temperament undermined her

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<sup>89</sup> In Western contexts, there are also similar discussion of the tension felt by "successful girls" at school when balancing their own achievements with what a proper girl should be, as learnt from "old" lessons about gender roles (e.g., Skelton et al., 2010).

fellow students' impression of her, which then negatively influenced the maintenance of Qian's friendships with other girls.

Besides Qian, Wenhua, another P5 girl student leader, complained about the student leader position's negative influence on her friendships with her ex-best friend. Unlike Qian, Wenhua blamed the negative influence on her heavy workload as student leader which reduced the time she had for playing with friends. Wenhua complained that performing her student leader duties (e.g., supervising peers, collecting groupmates' homework, and preparing the blackboard and teaching equipment) cost her a lot of after-class time, leaving her with too little time to play with her ex-best friend Qinyang. Therefore, Qinyang spent more time playing with Yulian, with whom she developed an intimate friendship that threatened her friendship with Wenhua (Field note, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Wenhua's opinion was shared by other children, such as Yuan, a P5 girl:

Student leaders play with student leaders. It is very difficult for a normal person to play with these leaders...[because] being a student leader means extra tasks from teachers, which would occupy the time that should be used to stay with friends. Without putting enough time into friendships, friends would feel estranged, and friendship would then become less close. (31<sup>st</sup> May 2016)

As discussed in Chapter 4, the length of time children spend playing together matters in intimate friendships, so a lack of play time can threaten these friendships. Therefore, the position of student leader carries the risk of limiting a child's time spent with friends, especially those who are not student leaders themselves.

In the above example, even though Wenhua and Qian experienced negative effects on their own friendships caused by their collective responsibilities as student leaders, everyday observation indicated that they both still spent considerable time serving the collective good in that role. One reason that emerged from these two girl student leaders' words was a fear of the negative

consequences of failing to do a good job. In Wenhua's words, prioritizing "collective" over "self" is a student leader's responsibility, and failure to do so will pose the risk of 'being criticized (*piping*) [by teachers and classmates] as incompetent student leader then gets dismissed' (Field note, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2016). In Qian's words, although she did not identify the negative consequences of a failed student leader performance as belittlement for her incompetence and loss of this powerful position, she also emotionally mentioned the embarrassment of "*piping*" (criticism). She cried and used a personal experience of being criticized by teachers for other children's misdeeds as an example of why she 'do[es] not want to do this job any more'. Qian said:

Sometimes, some naughty students' misdeeds during evening self-study are recorded by on-duty teachers. Then, the class teacher also "*piping*" (criticized) me in class the next day because she thought I did not do my job well to protect our classroom from losing points... I used to be asked to stand in the back of the classroom with the naughty boys in the following day's morning class meeting after their misbehaviours were warned by the on-duty teacher in the past night. (Field note, 14th March 2016)

In the Confucian-collectivist context, people who fail to fulfil their obligations to the collective are viewed as shameful and guilty (Bedford and Hwang, 2003). "*Piping*", especially public criticism, is then used as a way to punish such disappointing failure. Such public criticism (e.g., criticism of a student in front of other students, especially in a visual and physical way like being made to stand in the back of the classroom), as discussed in Chapter 6 (see section 6.2), produces the emotional injury of losing face (*mianzi*<sup>90</sup>) in the Chinese school setting (Schoenhals, 2016). Moreover, as mentioned in section 7.2 and confirmed by Schoenhals (2016:198), 'those of higher status are more vulnerable to losing face and feeling shame'. Student leaders, as the ones with higher status among peers in the class hierarchy, might feel an even stronger emotional impact than other peers when experiencing public criticism at school.

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<sup>90</sup> See more discussion of the importance of "*mianzi*" (face) in Chapter 6.

Therefore, to avoid the risk of losing face through public criticism, both Qian and Wenhua said that there was ‘no choice’ but to follow the commonly held expectation of student leaders that they will prioritize performance of their duties to the “collective” over individual friendships.

Although the above discussion has focused on tensions, this subsection (7.3.2) is not meant to oversimplify the relation between collective interest and individual interest as one solely of conflict. It acknowledges that collective interest and individual interest could coincide. For example, Wei’s behaviour of refusing a friend’s request to watch the dance practice of girls in his class, Qian’s decision to change her gentleness of temperament in peer supervision, and Wenhua’s choice of prioritizing her duties over her friends, can benefit their classes’ collective good (e.g., through a good performance in the inter-class points-earning/ranking competition). But simultaneously, these reactions can promote the individual good of each child by preventing loss of face through public criticism of failure to fulfil their obligations to the “collective”. At the same time, the discussion draws attention to the need for awareness that, among these P5 children, friends’ estrangement can be the cost of prioritizing the “collective” over the “individual” at school.

In sum, this section (7.3) has discussed how the idea of the “collective” (*jiti*) functions as both a “bridge” and a “boundary” in these P5 children’s friendships with peers at school. However, collective orientation is not the only influential factor. In fact, through combining this section’s discussion with that in Chapter 6, about children’s tendency to befriend peers who are “useful” to themselves, it seems that a collective orientation and an individual orientation coexist (see also Chapter 2) as factors simultaneously shaping children’s peer friendships at school. As discussed by Adams and Allan (1998: 6-12), different levels of context (e.g., individual level, network level, community level and societal level) need to be considered together when understanding a particular group of people’s contextualized constructions of friendship (see Chapter 2). Therefore, based on the community and societal levels of context (e.g., Central Primary

School's school context and China's Confucian-collectivist context), the following section focuses on understanding how teachers and parents (significant others in children's social network) contribute to such a coexisting collective and individual orientation in children's peer friendships at school by educating them in a rule for making friends – “making more friends, making ‘good’ friends”.

#### **7.4 Making more friends, making “good” friends: a rule for making friends as taught by teachers and parents**

Although it is common to notice children's obedience to adult authority (e.g., teachers at school and parents at home) because of an unbalanced power relation in other sociocultural contexts (Mayall, 2001; Montandon, 2001), in the Chinese context, the importance of venerating the authorities and offering respect, compliance and obedience to parents and teachers (e.g. Wang and Mao, 1996; Zhou et al., 2012) might be further strengthened by the Confucian-collectivist moral system (see section 7.2). In the field, one of the ways most frequently applied by children to show their obedience to parents and teachers was to quote what parents and teachers had said to them as reasons for their own behaviour. For example, as discussed in Chapter 5, in comparison of what children and teachers said about practices of heterosexuality in childhood, these children's habit of echoing their teachers was prominent. Similarly, when talking about making friends, “making more friends, making ‘good’ friends” (*duo jiao pengyou, jiao hao pengyou*) was commonly cited by almost all these P5 children as one key rule imparted by teachers and parents. This section seeks to argue that these significant adults used this rule to impart to children a sense that friendship is not only an individual issue but a collective one too.

According to interviews and informal conversations with teachers and parents, it seems that they both viewed teaching children the rules of making friends as a way to prepare children to enter China's ‘relation-centered’ context (see section 7.2). For example, a Chinese idiom “*zaijia kao fumu, chumen kao*

*pengyou*” (relying on parents at home, but relying on friends outside the home) and similar expressions (e.g., ‘having more friends means having more options in the future’) were commonly referred to by these significant adults with an emphasis on the necessity of having friends. For them, because of a sense of being obliged to support and help friends (e.g., Gummerum and Keller, 2008), building up a good number of friendships could benefit a person’s access to more social resources in China’s ‘relation-centered’ context (see section 7.2). In this case, they saw positive relationships with others as promoting individual success (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008:193). Thus, from their perspective, it was important for a child ‘to foster a habit of making friends if [he/she] wants to be a popular and successful adult in the future’ (a P5 teacher: Field note, 18<sup>th</sup> April 2016). However, merely having the ability to make many friends is not enough. As a P5 child’s parent added, ‘Friends must not be chosen blindly’ (Field note, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016). From these significant adults’ perspective, there was a consensus that, apart from the ability to make many friends, the ability of making a “right” choice in friend selection is also crucial.

When placing such friendship education in the school context, since classmates are the most important group of peers in children’s school lives (see previous sections and also Corsaro, 2003; Hadley, 2003), in most cases, teachers and parents viewed classmates as the children’s potential friends. As a result, both in children’s narratives and from my observations, “making more friends” was commonly rephrased and explained by teachers and parents as meaning: “befriend as many classmates as you can maintain harmonious and friendly relationships with”. To grasp the meaning of “making ‘good’ friends”, the first step is to understand what these significant adults mean by “good” friends. An episode that took place on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2016 during the weekly class meeting of a P5 class is a typical example of how teachers educated children as to what a “good” friend is.

During the meeting, children were guided by their teachers in finishing a questionnaire designed by the school’s teaching office to test children’s

understanding of the social rules of interpersonal interaction. This questionnaire included the question: ‘What is a “good” friend (*hao pengyou*)?’ The children were given three answers to choose from: (A) *zhengyou* [a friend who will criticize you if you are in the wrong], (B) *qiangyou* [a friend with achievements that you can learn from and make yourself better], (C) *ruoyou* [a friend with poor self-control and inadequate performance]. This question caused a “debate” between the children and the teacher. When the teacher asked what a good friend was, in children’s various answers, the views of one group of children was prominent. They said that a “good” friend meant one’s intimate friend. The teacher commented: ‘Yes, a “good” friend could be understood as a close friend, but it also refers to the friends who perform well (*biaoxian*<sup>91</sup> *hao*)’. To explain what she meant by this, the teacher added:

*Zhengyou* is a good friend because this friend could give you honest advice to protect you from making wrong decisions. *Qiangyou* is also a good friend, right? An outstanding friend who is developing well all around. This type of friend can be very helpful because we can definitely learn from them to improve ourselves.

When listening to the teacher’s explanation, the children nodded and echoed “yes”. Then, the teacher asked: ‘Is *ruoyou* a good friend? Such as the people who do not obey school rules and do not study hard? Should we choose to befriend them?’ At this, all of the children shouted: ‘No!’ When the teacher asked for a reason, many children simultaneously shouted out a Chinese idiom: “*jīn zhū zhè chí, jīn mò zhè hēi*” (when you touch red, you become red; when you touch black, you become black). In this example, this idiom means that “a ‘good’ friend will make you good, while a ‘bad’ friend will make you bad”. It suggests an awareness of peer friends’ significant influence on the individual’s behaviour (see also Adler and Adler, 1998; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Brechwald and Prinstein, 2011; Corsaro, 2015). In sum, this example suggests

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<sup>91</sup> See section 6.2 in Chapter 6 for discussion of the evaluation system of children’s “*biaoxian*” (performance) at school (e.g., what is good “*biaoxian*” and bad “*biaoxian*”).



that, although teachers acknowledged children's opinion of understanding a "good" friend as an intimate friend, a particular emphasis has been placed on constructing a "good" friend as one with good "*biaoxian*" (performance) at school, who has the potential to exert a positive influence on one's development.

As reported by many P5 children, similar ways of evaluating friends based on their school "*biaoxian*" emerged when their parents taught them to choose the "right" friends at school. For example, all of the children of migrant parents mentioned that when their migrant parents phoned them to check on their school lives, their parents always asked how they were getting along with their classmates and encouraged them to befriend "good" ones and stay away from "bad" ones. According to them, in their parents' eyes, "good" classmates always meant the high-achieving ones with good grades and disciplined behaviour; while the "bad" classmates commonly meant those who were labelled "*bu tinghua*" ("not listen [to parents' and teachers'] talks"; see section 7.2), "naughty trouble-makers", and "low-achieving and lazy in studying". Similar ways of evaluating their children's friends were cross-checked in my informal conversations with several P5 children's parents and grandparents in the field. Like the teachers, these parents also constructed a "good" friend as one with good school "*biaoxian*".

Since teachers and parents applied the same ways of constructing "good" friends (see also Hansen, 2015), it seems that, when educating children to follow the rule of "making more friends, making 'good' friends" at school, teachers and parents shared the same expectation – that of helping children to gain not only harmonious relationships with most classmates but also useful support for personal development. However, this individual-oriented benefit to children's personal school experiences and future development was not the teachers' and parents' only consideration. For example, as reported by several children and emerging in observations, the message "This is not just about you" (*zhe bu zhishi ni yigeren de shiqing*) was directly uttered or implied when both

teachers and parents highlighted to children the importance of following this rule for making friends. Through analysing the reason why teachers and parents thought that children's choice of friends was not just about themselves, it appeared that the adults viewed children not only as individuals but also as members of the class and family collectives. They valued this rule of "making more friends, making 'good' friends" because if children followed it when making friends at school, the entire class and family would benefit as well (but in different ways as discussed below).

Although both teachers and parents taught children the rule "making more friends, making 'good' friends" as a commonly held principle, they still had different emphases. As emerged in conversations with several teachers, when they educated children to follow this rule in making friends at school, their aim was to secure a "harmonious and positive environment" within the class collective. For them, ensuring harmonious relationships between children for maximum avoidance of conflict was always mentioned as one of their most important missions at school. This opinion, as expressed by these teachers, was cross-checked with the school authority's talks in most of the observed teachers' meetings. For example, the headteacher always strongly stressed the importance of avoiding conflicts between children, because such conflicts might cause accidents, such as physical injury occurring during fights (see also Wang, 2013). In the event of such serious consequences, teachers and the school authority were likely to be troubled not only by the students' parents but also by the higher educational authority (see also Wang, 2013; Liu and Hallinger, 2017). This was illustrated by a couple of teachers who complained during an office chat about their burdensome work as class teachers. They related how they had once paid a medical bill to conciliate angry parents who came to the school to argue because their children had been injured while fighting with peers at school. The angry parents blamed the students' conflicts on the teachers' neglect of duty. In such situations, teachers not only had to pay medical fees but also lost certain bonuses in the performance appraisal

system<sup>92</sup> (Field note, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2016). Therefore, both to follow the school's requirements and to protect their own interests, in daily student management teachers would always intervene quickly when they noticed an unharmonious atmosphere developing between children.

Because of the particular importance of maintaining general harmony among children, in some cases, teachers could struggle when some individual children's preference for only befriending outstandingly "good" classmates challenged the harmonious environment of the class collective. As several teachers claimed, because they were aware of these children's strong desire of being popular and welcomed by classmates at school<sup>93</sup> and the belief that individual success could promote positive relations with others (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008:193), they viewed the rule of "making 'good' friends" as an incentive to all individual children to keep improving their own school "*biaoxian*" (performance) in order to attract more friends. They believed that if all children could be motivated to make progress, both their individual "*biaoxian*" and the class's overall "*biaoxian*" could be improved (e.g., by gaining a better rank in the school level's points-earning/ranking system). However, while this idea was well intentioned, it did generate a negative consequence; namely, that when high-achieving children became very popular among peers, low-achieving children were likely to be marginalized in class (see Chapter 6). Therefore, in the field, there were several times when I observed some low-achieving children angrily and sadly complaining to teachers about being excluded by groups of high-achieving classmates. In such situations, teachers' reactions always suggested that they try to find a balance between "making more friends" and "making 'good' friends", but with an emphasis placed on harmony. For example, apart from encouraging these upset children to keep

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<sup>92</sup> As explained by teachers, harmony and safety in class was indexes considered in the school's performance appraisal system. If some serious conflicts arose between students, the teacher's performance would be negatively affected.

<sup>93</sup> Children's strong willingness to improve their own popularity among peers and increase the size of friendship groups in middle childhood has been noticed by other scholars (e.g., Corsaro, 2015), as mentioned in Chapter 2.

improving themselves in order to “attract” more friends, teachers also criticized (*pipi*ng) the children accused of this ‘inharmonious exclusion behaviour’ and re-emphasized the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships with classmates, since ‘we are all friends’ (*dajia doushi pengyou*) (Field note, 8<sup>th</sup> April 2016).

The discussion above indicates teachers’ strong emphasis on teaching children the importance of harmony in the class collective. It might explain why, in the field, when children talked about relationships with classmates, it was common to hear comments that equated classmates with friends, such as “All of my classmates are my friends”, along with the explanation that “The class collective needs a harmonious environment”. However, this does not mean that children only acknowledged the importance of harmonious relationships with classmates in order to please teachers by echoing their instructions. In fact, as mentioned by many children, harmonious relationships with classmates formed an important condition of feeling comfortable and happy during the long school time (see also Li, 2015). To be specific, because as classmates/groupmates/roommates, they were required to continually engage in frequent interactions with each other (see section 7.3.1) during school time, without harmonious relationships, as the children explained, they would suffer the stress of being stuck in ‘embarrassing’, ‘uncomfortable’, ‘depressing’ and ‘unhappy’ interactions with ones whom they did not like or who did not like them. In this case, befriending as many classmates as possible to maintain harmonious and friendly relationships with them was constructed as good behaviour in making friends at school, and would simultaneously benefit the individual children’s wellbeing, the class collective’s environment, and the teachers’ performance evaluation.

In comparison to the school context, in the family context, although Chinese parents appreciate the importance of having many friends, a particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of making “good” friends (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). In the field, it was common for children’s parents to use

different ways of “investigating” their children’s friend selections at school (e.g., by phoning teachers, asking me about it when encountering me in town, or enquiring of children’s classmates). The reason, as it emerged from conversations with several P5 children’s parents, was that parents commonly considered the consequences of friend selection as a long-term chain reaction. A concern frequently expressed by them was that bad friends would have a negative influence on academic performance; without a good academic performance, opportunities to enter a good university, find a good job and offer the next generation a better environment to grow up in were likely to be diminished. In this case, from these parents’ perspective, as one P5 child’s mother explained, ‘I definitely encourage her to befriend many classmates at school. [...] However, having a bad friend is worse than having no friend’ (Field note, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016). Parents’ strong concern over possible adverse consequences for their children’s personal development might be rooted in the obligation-based and collective-oriented Chinese family relationship.

In contemporary Chinese studies, there is an argument that marketization challenges Chinese people’s traditional Confucian and collective-oriented values within the family, such as filial piety (e.g., Yan, 2011). However, as noticed in this project as well as in other Chinese based studies, ‘family obligation remains strong’ (Qi, 2016:49) in China. Parents are likely to show altruistic motives towards children when rearing them (Démurger and Xu, 2013). Correspondingly, children and young people still express ‘the importance of supporting, assisting, and respecting their families both currently and in the future when they become adults’ (Fuligni and Zhang, 2004:191). In the field, similarly, as emerged from chats with a couple of returned migrant workers, children’s development was the central consideration when deciding to start and finish migrant work. For example, as stated by Cai’s mother, who returned to town when Cai entered P5, she left to ‘make more money because raising a child now is costly; whatever the club [e.g., dancing and drawing], it costs hundreds or around thousand Chinese Yuan’, and returned because ‘Cai

is going to be in middle school with an increasing need of stronger academic tutoring that her grandparents cannot handle' (Field note, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016). From the children's perspective, as children of migrant parents commonly explained in conversations in the field, they kept studying hard not only for themselves but also to repay their parents. In their words, since their parents' motivation for industriously working away from the hometown was to make money to provide them with a better life, it was their obligation to repay their parents by performing (*biaoxian*) well at school and becoming a promising student, with the ability to 'well take care of my parents when they get old, like what they are doing to me now' (Xiaoming, a P5 boy, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

The above-described conversations with migrant parents and their children suggest that a feeling of mutual obligation is prominent in the relationship of parents and children. Also, their ways of fulfilling family obligations conformed to other scholars' findings that today, as academic achievement is heavily stressed in the Chinese context (see Chapter 2), in families with children in school, the parents' obligation is considered to include improving children's educational (academic) success as part of a 'family business' (Huang and Gove, 2015:44); while for children, 'success in academic life is one of the most important filial duties' (Xu, 2016:4). Accordingly, because of the belief that high-achieving friends have a positive influence on children's academic performance (e.g., Hanushek et al., 2003), parents' practice of educating children to befriend "good" classmates, and children's acceptance of this friend selection rule, support both children and parents in performing their family obligations.

Apart from family obligation, the family's collective "face" shared by its members can be another factor that strengthens parents' concern over the influence of friends on their own children's individual success. For example, when I visited Bao's (a P5 boy) home with his class teacher on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016, Bao's grandmother asked his class teacher who the boy's friends were at school. Bao chipped in to propose his high-achieving deskmate as his friend,

concealing his “true” friend<sup>94</sup>, a boy who was labelled the most famous naughty boy in P5. However, as noticed in daily observations, the relationship between Bao and his deskmate was far less close than that with his naughty friend. As Bao explained in the following days, he lied because he did not want to upset his grandmother. However, Bao’s lie was exposed by his class teacher. Then Bao’s grandmother warned him to stay away from the naughty friend, saying ‘if you keep playing with him, how can you improve your study? If you keep behaving like this [referring to academic performance], do not ask me to attend your next parent meeting (*jiashang hui*)<sup>95</sup>; I do not want to lose face together with you’. This example suggests that Bao’s grandmother viewed Bao’s unsatisfying academic performance as a shameful affair that not only undermined Bao’s “face” but also her own “face”. A similar finding on the influence of children’s performance on parents’ “face” has been presented by other scholars. As exemplified by Schoenhals (2016:88), in the Chinese school setting, winning glory (*zheng guang*) [or gaining face (*zhanglian*)] for parents was used to reward children’s good performance (e.g., academic success), while causing loss of face for the parents (*diu ta fumu de lian*) was used to criticize a child’s failure (e.g., in a major test). This phenomenon can be rooted in the Chinese family principle that ‘family members are conceptualized as one body’ (Kwan, 2000:24). In this case, children’s ‘individual development and

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<sup>94</sup> It was not only in Bao’s case but also in that of other children that naming the “good” ones and hiding the “bad” ones in front of adults, despite spending more time with the “bad” ones than with the “good” ones, was a common strategy adopted by children. For example, in conversations with me, in observed conversations between children and teachers/parents, and in my daily observations, children’s nominated friends did not always match the ones they closely engaged with in a friend-way. This not only suggests that children do not always accommodate these significant adults’ teaching (Hadley, 2003; Farrer, 2006; Corsaro, 2015), but also indicates that, when disagreeing with significant adults, children might prefer to hide the disagreement to achieve a “harmony within hierarchy” in relationships with these adults (see section 7.2), at least on the surface.

<sup>95</sup> A meeting organized by the class teacher to share with all parents information about their children’s performance at school. In the meeting, teachers always share with parents the children’s grade and rank in the last major exam and overall performance (which is more about behaviour). High-achieving children’s parents would be asked to talk to other parents to share their successful experience of educating children, while parents of children with academic and behaviour problems were likely to be asked by class teachers to stay after the meeting for extra chats.

performance are to achieve the success of the family' (Huang and Gove, 2015:44). Conversely, children's individual failures shame both themselves and their parents because, in the Chinese context, there is a 'tendency to credit superiors for the successes of their inferiors and blame them for their failures' (Schoenhals, 2016:88).

In sum, as has emerged from the above discussion, when significant adults teach children the rule of "making more friends, making 'good' friends", not only individual-oriented factors (e.g., children's individual development, teachers' performance evaluation and parents' "face") but also collective-oriented factors (e.g., the class environment and the family's mutual obligations) are considered. According to children's reactions when being educated about this rule (e.g., equating classmates to friends, or hiding "bad" friends in front of parents), it is very likely that they have been made aware that, although whom to befriend was an individual choice, the consequences do not just affect themselves. The consequences are collective as well, with influences on significant others in their lives. These collective consequences represent a fundamental reason why a child's choices of friends are not just about him/her.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed how China's Confucian-collectivist sociocultural values, such as the need for individuals to submit themselves to the "collective" so as to contribute collective good and serve other in-group members (Yan, 2005; Yu, 2008; Wang, 2011a), influenced these P5 Chinese children's understandings and experiences of friendships at school.

Through reviewing constructions of the relationship between "self", "others" and the "collective" in China's Confucianism and collectivism, this chapter argues that the collective orientation in Chinese children's understandings of relationships with others is a result of joint action by Chinese culture and



political ideology (e.g. Yan, 2005; Ho, 2006; Yu, 2008; Barbalet, 2014). This alliance between Chinese Confucian virtues and collectivist values is embodied in China's national moral education scheme (Li, 1990; Li et al., 2004). Through introducing the way Central Primary School incorporated moral education in its courses, events and school decorations, this chapter indicates that a strongly collective-oriented environment was constructed in this school context.

In such a collective-oriented environment, a shared collective identity as members of the same "collective" (e.g., class) encouraged spatial closeness and frequent interactions between in-group members (e.g., classmates), fostering in them the belief that it is the individual's obligation to prioritize the collective good over personal needs and support other in-group members. Therefore, as discussed in this chapter, such collective orientation has had a significant influence on these P5 children's experiences of peer friendships at school. On the one hand, it contributes to the creation of friendships between in-group members through ensuring opportunities for them to get to know each other during frequent interactions, and strengthening the affective bond between them in the process of mutual help. On the other hand, this collective orientation might also restrict children's friendship experiences. Fearful of being criticized for failing to fulfil their obligations to the collective (Bedford and Hwang, 2003; Schoenhals, 2016), some children, such as student leaders as a representative group, have to prioritize serving collectivist goals over avoiding the negative consequences of this collective-oriented choice on their own interpersonal relationships.

In such discussions of children's collective-orientation in conducting relationships with others, cross-gender friendship/cooperation and student leaders' experiences of friends' estrangement were particularly linked back to Chapters 5 and 6 as a way of understanding the complexity of children's relationships in practice. It is argued that, since children can simultaneously hold multiple identities and serve different collective groups, their varied or

even contradictory behaviour in different situations might have resulted from the different identities they were highlighting. For example, different gender identities as boys and girls can cause a hostile attitude towards opposite-gender peers as well as gender separation in interaction (see Chapters 5 and 6); while shared identity as groupmates can encourage close cooperation between boys and girls. Also, discussions of the way burdensome responsibilities shouldered by student leaders restricted their friendship experiences were combined with the description in Chapter 6 of how popular they were among peers as the “ideal” examples of “useful” friends to target. This has contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the student leader system’s complex influences on children’s peer relationships at school.

This chapter has focused not only on children but also on significant adults – teachers and parents – in children’s lives. Through exploring why the rule: “making more friends, making ‘good’ friends” was valued by both teachers and parents when educating children about making friends at school, this chapter suggests that children’s choice of friends has been extended from a personal affair to a collective one with influences on teachers and parents as well. Therefore, these significant adults were motivated to monitor children’s friend-making at school, with the likely result that adults intervene significantly in children’s friendships. On the one hand, adult intervention can at times have a positive influence by guiding children’s choice of friends to help them avoid being negatively influenced by peers with problematic behaviour. On the other hand, adults’ intervention in children’s understandings of friendship and their choice of friends, which are strongly embedded with values highlighting friends’ school achievements and the instrumental function of friendship, could cause children stress and, for the lower-achieving children, could result in exclusion by their peers at school because of their lesser ability to make themselves useful and helpful to their peers. This concern can be demonstrated by the large overlap between the characteristics of “good”/“bad” friends constructed

by teachers and parents and the characteristics of popular/unpopular peers as reported by children (see Chapters 5 and 6).

In general, this chapter observes that since class, school and family are important units within which children form a sense of the “collective”, and classmates, teachers and parents are significant others in their everyday lives as in-group members, when children understand and practise friendships, these important “collectives” and significant others are influential factors. Therefore, the chapter indicates the importance of being aware of the collective orientation in these children’s understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school. However, this chapter also suggests the tensions experienced by children when personal interests conflicted with the collective good, and when their own friendship wishes conflicted with the friendship advice from teachers and parents. Through analysing these findings, it seems that different sets of sociocultural norms (e.g., traditional Chinese Confucian virtues, socialist values, collectivistic norms, bureaucratic norms, and individualist values) simultaneously operate in the school. Since these different norms do not always align, tensions between different sets of sociocultural norms can be noticed in children’s understandings of relationships with others. For example, on the one hand, children were educated to follow a socialist and collectivist ideology, which encourage them to form harmonious and equal interpersonal relationships. However, on the other hand, they were also told to tolerate hierarchy in relationships, following Confucian virtues and bureaucratic norms (see Chapters 6 and 7). Such coexistence of different and conflicting sociocultural norms in Chinese school settings is found by other scholars (e.g., Hansen, 2015; Wang, 2019), when they examine ‘the Chinese path to individualization’ (Yan, 2010:489). Inspired by these scholars’ studies, my findings can lead to a future research study exploring how Chinese people’s understandings and experiences of children’s school friendships change over generations during China’s social process of individualization (see Chapter 8).

# Chapter 8 Conclusion

## 8.1 Introduction

Friendship with peers, as an important form of relationships with others, matters a lot in children's everyday lives (Deegan, 2005; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Nayak, 2013; Corsaro, 2015; Davies, 2015). From debates in the literature (see Chapter 2) I learned about the varied ways in which different disciplines view children and their childhood friendships. I followed the sociological perspective that placed children's friendships in particular contexts to understand their complexity and diversity (Adams and Allan, 1998; Allan and Adams, 2007) in their socially constructed childhoods (James and Prout, 2003). Given the policy-oriented and academic need to develop an in-depth understanding of rural Chinese children's peer friendships at school (see Chapter 2), this research aimed to explore the complexity and diversity of Chinese children's understandings and practices of peer friendships in the context of a rural primary boarding school. Through five months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork with Primary Year 5 (P5) children in Central Primary School, a rural primary boarding school in the central-western area of China (see Chapter 3), this thesis has answered four specific research questions:

**Question 1:** What are the different types of friendships between children and their peers in a school setting? How do children understand and practise different types of friendships with peers at school?

**Question 2:** How does gender influence children's friendships with peers in a school setting?

**Question 3:** How do the power relations between children and significant adults (teachers and parents) and the power structures amongst children influence children's experiences of friendships with peers?

**Question 4:** How do Chinese sociocultural values shape children's understandings of friendships with peers and their daily acts of doing friendships in a school setting?

Through answering these four research questions, this thesis has not only revealed what these P5 children said about friends and friendships, and how they did friendships with peers at school, but has also explored how elements of the surrounding context (Adams and Allan, 1998), especially "gender" (Question 2), "power over relationships" (Question 3) and "Confucian-collectivist values" (Question 4), function as influential factors in these children's construction of peer friendships. In this concluding chapter, I will firstly summarize the main findings that answer my four research questions. Then, the focus shifts to a discussion of the implications of this study's findings for the existing literature, policy and practice, and the methodological considerations of studying children's friendships in general and in a Chinese educational setting. At the end, through a concluding reflection, I will step back to reflect on the limitations of this project and suggest directions for future studies on this topic.

## **8.2 Summary of findings**

Having addressed my research questions across the four findings chapters, this thesis presents a complex, dynamic and vivid picture of friends and friendships in P5 children's daily school lives in the context of a rural primary boarding school in China. Since answers to these questions have been interwoven throughout the four findings chapters, this section aims to reorganize the findings so as to summarize the answers to each research question.

**8.2.1 Question 1:** What are the different types of friendships between children and their peers in a school setting? How do children understand and practise different types of friendships with peers at school?

As argued by other scholars, friendship is not a homogeneous concept (e.g., Allan, 1979; Adams and Allan, 1998; Spencer and Pahl, 2006) but can be categorized into different types, such as intimate friendship and instrumental friendship in different situations (e.g., Tang, 2010). Children might form friendship groups on different bases and highlight different aspects of friendship in different contexts (e.g., Hundley and Cohen, 1999; George and Browne, 2000; Chen et al., 2004; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Similarly, in the context of Central Primary School, P5 children constructed friendships according to different criteria. This thesis mainly discussed friendships based on intimacy between individuals (“intimate friendship”; see Chapters 4 and 5), friendships based on friends’ “usefulness” to benefit the individual’s personal school experiences (“instrumental friendship”; see Chapter 6), and friendships based on individuals’ shared identity as “in-group members” (*zijiren*) of the same “collective” (*jiti*) (see Chapter 7).

Pahl and Spencer (2004) argue that some friendships are based on just one main form of interaction, whereas others are more complex and multistranded. As the most valued friendships with “special” friends (e.g., best friends), intimate friendships were constructed by children as “multistranded”. The characteristics of intimate friendships were commonly described by children as mutual emotional support, reciprocal sharing of secrets and sensitive topics, enjoyable play, and loyal company (see Chapter 4). Such intimate friendships have multiple functions in children’s school lives. For example, intimate friends were the ones who were always there (Brownlie, 2014) to give children timely and effective emotional support (see Chapter 4) during their extensive time at boarding school away from high-quality family support (Hansen, 2015). An intimate friend could also be used as an “instrumental” resource to provide the child with financial, academic and social support at school. For instance, intimate female friends can protect girls from unwanted male pursuit and help girls to safely interact with the boys they like in the school context of gender separation (see Chapter 5), against the threat of peers’ heterosexual teasing

(e.g., Thorne, 1993; Mellor, 2006) and teachers' surveillance (e.g., Farrer, 2006; Shen, 2015).

Since intimate friendships have been constructed as the most important relationships with "special" friends, children showed strong expectations of "particularity" and "reciprocity" in intimate friendships (see Chapter 4). They expected to ensure, through friendship practices, that both they and their intimate friends reciprocally treated each other as the "special" ones, differing from other peers outside their intimate friendships. Accordingly, this thesis borrowed from family studies the idea of "display" (Finch, 2007) to explore these P5 children's practices of convincing themselves, their intimate friends and other surrounding "audiences" (e.g., other peers and myself as researcher) (Finch, 2007; Herrmann-Pillath, 2010) of the high-level intimacy between themselves and their intimate friends. In these intimate friendship displays, children creatively developed a range of strategies, such as creating an exclusive "intimate friends only" zone, to draw boundaries between intimate friends and other peers (see Chapter 4).

In comparison to intimate friendships, instrumental friendships were valued mainly for the friends' "usefulness" (Kapur, 1991; Chen et al., 2004) in enhancing the individual's school experiences, with less focus on emotional commitment (see Chapter 6). In most cases, the "useful" friends nominated by children were those who had power over other peers at school, including those with advanced academic performance, those functioning as student leaders, and the older ones (see Chapter 6). As will be summarized in Question 3, since children of relatively lower status in the class hierarchy were likely to experience exclusion and marginalization at school, befriending "powerful" peers to gain their support and protection was a strategy promoting these children's "survival" or enabling them to "live better" at school. Given this individual-orientation of instrumental friendships, mutual benefit rather than reciprocal intimacy is the basis of such friendships (Haseldine, 2011). Therefore, in most cases of instrumental friendship, children having lower

status in the class repaid their “powerful” instrumental friends’ support and protection by acting as their supporters at school and doing them favours. Despite the ability of the children involved to provide mutual benefits and so to be “useful” to each other, they were still not equal. In most cases, the party with higher status in the class hierarchy still had power over the party with lower status.

When a child’s friend(s) had power over him/her in an instrumental friendship, the imbalanced power relationship easily produced the risk to the child of experiencing exploitation, contempt, and ridicule. Therefore, although this thesis respected children’s choices, using the words “friend” and “friendship” to refer to their relationships with “useful” peers, it recognizes the complexity of such relationships and suggests evaluating the nature of “instrumental friendship” on a case-to-case basis. As discussed in Chapter 6, in some cases, because of the lack of justice and reciprocal emotional commitment, the title of “friendship” might give way to other designations of instrumental-oriented relationships, such as patron-client tie (Wolf, 1966:16), business association (Lynch, 2015:12), or utility-based alliance. However, in other cases, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, an affective bond could be added in the process of exchanging assistance (Qi, 2013). This added affectivity can distinguish the instrumental friendship from other instrumental-oriented relationships where the sole focus is on the instrumental value of the interaction (Lynch, 2015). Such affectivity can also upgrade instrumental friendship to a type more closely resembling intimate friendship (see Chapter 6).

A category of friendships based on individuals’ shared identity as “in-group members” (*zijiren*) of a shared “collective” (*jiti*) (e.g., classmates from a same class) was contributed to this analysis by the collective-oriented school context. Within this context, children were not only spatially close to each other and in frequent interaction with each other, but were also taught to be morally obligated to take care of each other (Gummerum and Keller, 2008), to maintain



harmonious and friendly relationships with each other (Zhang and Tian, 2014), and to cooperate well in the interest of the collective good (e.g., collective performance (*biaoxian*) and harmony) (see Chapter 7). In this case, although the collective good might be understood as an instrumental purpose of friendship, there was a key difference between instrumental friendships and those based on shared identity as “in-group members” (*zijiren*) of the same “collective” (*jiti*). The difference was that friendship between in-group members highlighted the collective good rather than personal interest. In comparison to intimate friendships and instrumental friendships, these collective-oriented friendships have relatively loose boundaries on the basis of which to distinguish friends from other school peers. The most prominent example was the children’s claim that “all my classmates are my friends”.

In sum, through unpacking the characteristics of friendships formed on different bases, this thesis has pointed out the complexity of children’s friendships. Also, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, given the dynamic quality of friendships (Morrison and Burgman, 2009; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Ryle, 2015), these differently based friendships are not isolated from each other. For example, growing affectivity in instrumental friendships and friendships between “in-group members” with a collective orientation might result in everyday interactions that contribute to the progressive development of these relationships into intimate friendships.

### **8.2.2 Question 2:** How does gender influence children’s friendships with peers in a school setting?

When researching children’s friendships, gender difference offers a meaningful perspective (see Chapter 2). Gendered difference in the level of intimacy within friendship has been well discussed (Davies, 2015; Ryle, 2015). In general, there is a belief that, with a higher degree of shared feelings and emotions, girls’ friendships are more intimate than boys’ (Ryle, 2015). However, this thesis has some reservations on this point, at least when the

discussion concerns boys' and girls' intimate friendships. Although this thesis did not run a precise comparison between boys' and girls' friendships, as discussed in Chapter 4, boys and girls not only highlighted similar characteristics of intimate friendships but also showed similar expectations of "particularity" and "reciprocity" in practices of intimate friendship. For these children, as emerged in examples of boys' and girls' similar emotional reactions when intimate friends failed to meet their expectations, it appeared that intimate friendships were emotionally charged relationships for both boys and girls (see Chapter 4).

Although boys' and girls' talk and practices of intimate friendships might not suggest gender difference, the prominent phenomenon of the majority of boys' and girls' nominated friendship groups being same-sex suggested a "rule" of gender separation in making friends. Gender separation in children's relationships and interactions with peers is commonly noticed in school settings in both Western and Chinese contexts (e.g., Thorne, 1993; Liu, 2006; Evans, 2007). As a result of gender separation, cross-gender interactions are frequently heterosexualized and easily lead to heterosexual teasing (Davies, 1993). A similar situation arose among P5 children in Central Primary School (see Chapter 5). These P5 children commonly and publicly expressed the idea that girls and boys are different and should be separated. In everyday interactions, boys and girls carefully policed the gender boundary, and individual children who crossed it and closely interacted with opposite-gender peers were likely to become the subjects of romance gossip as well as heterosexual teasing (see Chapter 5). Children's fear of being involved in romance gossip can be rooted in the context of heterosexual romantic relationships between school-aged boys and girls being constructed by adults as dangerous "premature love" (*zaolian*), which is not allowed in school settings (Farrer, 2006; Liu, 2006; Shen, 2015) (see Chapter 5).

Although the gender-separated school context did not support children's practices of heterosexual liking, some children still challenged the adults'

authority (Farrer, 2006) and practised heterosexuality privately, away from teachers' surveillance (Renold, 2005; Holford et al., 2013). Private practices of heterosexuality at particular times and in particular spaces, such as the unlit path between the teaching building and the dormitory building after evening self-study, were conveyed by children's narratives. Through observing such practices, this thesis discovered how children both challenged and strengthened the gender boundary by using same-gender intimate friends as a supportive resource in their romantic adventures at school (see Chapter 5). It suggested that, where gender separation exists, children used same-gender friends' companionship as a shelter to enable and protect their interactions with the opposite-gender peers whom they liked. Moreover, same-gender friends worked as gatekeepers to protect children from unwanted suitors. In return, the deep involvement of same-gender friends in children's private experiences of heterosexual romance could strengthen the intimacy between children and their same-gender friends. However, the study also pointed out that children's intimate relationships with same-gender friends might be threatened by a heterosexual romance should it result in a romantic contest between same-gender friends, or should an imbalance emerge in the attention and time dedicated to the friendship and to the romance (see also Walton et al., 2002; Giordano et al., 2006; Zheng, 2008).

Moreover, because children commonly used teasing to police the gender boundary in the gender separation context (Thorne, 1993; Mellor and Epstein, 2006; Bhana, 2016), children easily showed a hostile attitude to opposite-gender peers (James, 1993). This hostile attitude was further strengthened by the unbalanced power relationship between boys and girls as a result of student leader positions being held by more girls than boys (see Chapter 6). In turn, the hostility produced a challenging context for the creation of cross-gender friendships. For example, the gender group is a significant unit in which children fostered a sense of the "collective" (Snow, 2001), and the sense of the "collective" obliged the individual to consider the influence of his/her own

behaviour on the collective good (see Chapter 7). Thus, boys who befriended high-achieving girls, as in the cases of instrumental friendship known as “*toukao nvsheng*” (relying on girls) were likely to experience stress imposed by the boys’ group. This was because “*toukao nvsheng*” was constructed as shameful behaviour, namely, “surrendering to girls”, which betrayed the entire boys’ group by causing it to lose collective “face” (see Chapters 6 and 7). However, in some other cases, it was just because of the hostile attitude between boys and girls and the existence of gendered spaces on the campus (e.g., toilets and dormitory rooms) that befriending opposite-gender peers became a necessary choice at school (see Chapter 6). For example, in order to cross the gender boundary to carry out certain tasks for the benefit of an individual’s and/or a group’s collective interest, some girl student leaders viewed befriending some boys as a strategy for gaining the boys’ support when experiencing difficulties in working with other boys. This might happen when boys hid in the boys’ dormitory rooms or toilets to avoid doing their assigned tasks (see Chapter 7).

**8.2.3 Question 3:** How do the power relations between children and significant adults (teachers and parents) and the power structures amongst children influence children’s experiences of friendships with peers?

When studying children’s friendships, children’s experiences of power imbalance in friendship groups (e.g., George and Browne, 2000; Stoudt, 2006) and of facing intervention by significant adults, that is, parents and teachers (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Davies, 2015), have been discussed by some scholars (see Chapter 2). Similarly, this thesis, through exploring the phenomenon of some children having power over other school peers, unpacked the necessity of forming instrumental friendships (see Chapter 6) at school, a setting fraught with hierarchical peer relationships (Adler and Adler, 1998; Hansen, 2015).

To be specific, this thesis suggested that, at Central Primary School, children could have power over other peers through advanced academic achievement, positions as student leaders, and close social connections with older children (see Chapter 6). Amongst these influential elements, advanced academic achievement and positions as student leaders were closely connected, establishing children who had both advantages as the most “powerful” ones, and who were welcomed by other peers. These children’s “power” can be attributed to China’s academic achievement-oriented evaluation system (see Chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7) and the school’s organizing mechanisms (student leader system, group-based working group model and points-earning/ranking competition system) (see Chapter 6). Good academic performance was valued by children, parents and teachers as a crucial characteristic of the “ideal”/“good” child (Xu et al., 2006), because study was constructed as school-aged children’s most important duty (Liu, 2006). In addition, good academic performance was viewed as ‘the only real way’ for rural children to escape their forebears’ identities as rural people (Dello-Iacovo, 2009:246) (see Chapter 5). Therefore, peers with good academic performance were recommended as “good” choices in friend selection when teachers and parents educated children in the rule of making friends (see Chapter 7). Moreover, in Central Primary School, because of the group-based working group model and the points-earning/ranking competition system, children with good academic performance were the most sought-after by peers in the process of forming working groups (see Chapter 6). The reason is that a child with good academic performance could not only win points for his/her working group in academic tasks, but could also constitute an important resource for improving his/her groupmates’ academic performances by offering academic support. By contrast with these children with good academic performance, children with bad academic performance were likely to be marginalized and excluded by peers. Children with good academic performance were also likely to be selected as student leaders if they also showed disciplined behaviour at school (see also Hansen, 2015). Student leaders are a group of children elected by

classmates and assigned by teachers to be responsible for supervising fellow students and reporting any misbehaviour to teachers (see also Bakken, 2000; Hansen, 2012, 2015; Schoenhals, 2016). Since student leaders were constructed as teachers' assistants, representing teachers' authority when teachers were not present, and fellow students were taught to show obedience to them (Hansen, 2012, 2015), they formed a group of children who were "officially" powered over other peers (see Chapter 6).

Because the power imbalance amongst children resulted in different levels of popularity and experiences in peer relationships, children with relatively lower status in the class hierarchy showed enthusiasm for befriending "powerful" peers. With an instrumental orientation, they expected to gain access to "powerful" friends' "power" and consequently to academic and/or social support and protection for themselves in their everyday school lives. Befriending academically successful children could win academic help and so improve a child's own academic performance, hence raising his/her status in the class hierarchy. Befriending girl student leaders could decrease some boys' risk of being reported to teachers for their misdeeds; befriending older children meant having "older brothers/sisters" to give protection against being bullied by same-age peers (see Chapter 6). However, because of this power imbalance, as summarized in Question 1, when discussing the benefits for children of befriending popular and attractive peers, one cannot avoid considering the potential risks of exclusion and exploitation in friendships.

Apart from power structures amongst children, adults' intervention in children's friendships, based on the unbalanced children-adults power relationship, was also noticed in this research. This thesis examined the traditional Chinese moral principle that children need to show respect, compliance and obedience to parents and teachers (e.g. Wang and Mao, 1996; Zhou et al., 2012; see Question 4) in combination with children's tendency to echo in talks what teachers and parents taught them about the "rules" of peer relationships (see Chapters 5 and 7). Consequently, the study indicated that the attitudes of

teachers and parents, as powerful adults in children's lives, towards children's friendships significantly intervened in their understandings and practices of friendship. On the one hand, parents' and teachers' intervention in friendships can benefit children in their friendship experiences (e.g., by supporting children's efforts to avoid friends' negative influences and to find suitable friends) (Frankel and Myatt, 2013). On the other hand, teachers' and parents' strong emphasis on the importance of considering friends' school achievements and on the instrumental function of friendship could create risks. For example, lower-achieving children could experience exclusion at school because of being less able to make themselves "useful" to their peers. This concern is evidenced by the large overlap between the instrumental-focused characteristics of "good" friends constructed by teachers and parents when teaching children the rule of making friends (see Chapter 7), and what counted as "usefulness" when children befriended "useful" friends (see Chapter 6).

**8.2.4 Question 4:** How do Chinese sociocultural values shape children's understandings of friendships with peers and their daily acts of doing friendships in a school setting?

When studying children's friendships, what children say about friendships and do in friendship practices need to be situated and interpreted within the sociocultural contexts in which they live (see Chapter 2). As observed by Adams and Allan (1998), the elements applied by scholars in constructing contexts for their friendship studies can vary based on the intention, perspective, and vision of the analysis. From amongst the abundant Chinese sociocultural values, this thesis mainly invoked the Confucian-collectivist ethos to support its analysis of the collective orientation in these Chinese children's school friendships. In its discussions, the study particularly highlighted the collective-oriented values of individuals submitting to the "collective" in order to contribute to the collective good, as well as caring about other "in-group members" (see Chapter 7). It also pointed out that in these school-aged children's everyday lives, significant units, such as class, group and family,

were the places where children formed a sense of the “collective”, while classmates, teachers and family members (especially parents) were the significant “in-group members”. Through understanding children’s peer friendships at school in the context of such collective-oriented Confucian-collectivist values, this thesis argued that it was because of such values that friendship was not only an individual issue but a collective one too.

Through unpacking how the idea of the “collective” causes the spatial closeness, frequent interactions, and moral obligation to take care of each other between “in-group members”, this thesis explained how the creation of friendships between children and their classmates/groupmates/roommates was encouraged. The study also discussed the potential negative consequences for the individual’s interpersonal relationships of prioritizing the “collective” over “individuals” (see Chapter 7). In these discussions, this thesis also suggested that the above-discussed contextual elements of “gender” (Question 2), “power over relationships” (Question 3), and “Confucian-collectivist values” (Question 4) were not isolated but related (Adams and Allan, 1998) when shaping children’s friendships. For example, an obligation to the class’s collective interests could challenge the gender separation rule in some cases. Some girl student leaders noted that befriending boys could increase the boys’ willingness to cooperate in academic and disciplinary matters. This, in turn, could make the boys behave better and increase their groups’ chances of winning the competition (Chapter 6). Moreover, while Chapter 6 discussed how student leaders could benefit from being able to power over other peers, particularly in certain cases of instrumental friendship, Chapter 7 offered another perspective, exploring the “negative” effects on intimate friendships experienced by student leaders. Chapter 7 argued that, in the school context shaped by Confucian-collectivist values, student leaders, as the ones with responsibility for supervising peers to ensure a well-organized workgroup or classroom, were expected to place the group’s collective interest before their own individual needs and interests (see also Hansen, 2015). Therefore, for



example, in some cases, student leaders had to sacrifice their play time and the company of friends to work on tasks that promoted the collective interests of a class or working group. Since intimate friendship foregrounded the importance of spending considerable time playing together and accompanying each other (see Chapter 4), these student leaders might experience estrangement from intimate friends (see Chapter 7).

The influence of Confucian-collectivist values also emerged when investigating the negotiations between children and their teachers and parents regarding friend selection. Since parents and teachers are significant adults in children's experiences of everyday relationships with others (Davies, 2015), it was not rare to find in the literature accounts of adults' interventions in children's friendships (e.g., Updegraff et al., 2001; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). For these P5 children, "making more friends, making 'good' friends" was a key rule for making friends at school, as taught by both teachers and parents. This rule reflected teachers' and parents' expectations of children not only to build up a wide friendship network with peers for the sake of harmonious interpersonal relationships at school, but also to select "proper" friends (e.g., ones with good academic performance and disciplined behaviour) to benefit the individual's personal development (see Chapter 7). As emerged from these P5 children's everyday practices of friendships, their obedience to this rule was prominent. The motivations of this obedience can be multiple. One possibility is that, since Confucianism stressed children's obedience to parents and teachers as a moral feature of the "ideal"/"good" child (Xu et al., 2006), taking in what teachers and parents said to them (*tinghua*) to guide their own behaviour (Gao, 1996, 1998; Tardif and Wan, 2001) was commonly practised amongst P5 children as a way of demonstrating their moral character and avoiding criticism (*piping*) (see Chapter 7). In addition, the study discussed how Confucian-collectivist values constructed the relations between a child's behaviour in making friends, their teachers'/parents' individual interests, and their class's/family's collective interests. The discussion indicated that, although

whom to befriend was an individual choice, the consequences did not just affect children themselves. The consequences were collective as well, with effects on the teachers and parents in their lives (e.g., teachers' performance evaluation and parents' "face"). Therefore, if children did not follow this rule for making friends, their choices might go against significant adults' individual good and the collective interests of their class or family.

As a result, to show their obedience to the highlighted elements of "harmony" and "instrumental usefulness" in this rule of friend selection, many children displayed diplomatic and sophisticated attitudes when dealing with their peers. In particular, they equated classmates to "friends" (see Chapter 7) to achieve harmonious relationships, and befriended high-achieving friends (see Chapter 6) to promote the self's current school experiences and future personal development. Such behaviours not only blurred the boundary between "friends" and "classmates" or "groupmates" in some cases, but also contributed significantly to the phenomenon whereby high-achieving children were commonly welcomed by peers as "good" friends.

Altogether, this section 8.2 has summarized the main findings that answered the four research questions. As shown in these summaries, the richness and complexity of findings on children's friendships and on the surrounding influential contexts are prominent. When placing these children's dynamic and complex friendships in the school context within which a variety of influential factors are closely connected and function simultaneously, this research suggests that these children kept negotiating their identities and testing the boundaries between different practices of friendships in different groups. In the school setting, children simultaneously hold multiple identities, served different collective groups, and befriended different groups of peers. They thus needed to adjust continuously the boundaries that they set up between themselves, their different groups of friends, and other school peers. For example, to maintain intimate friendships, children needed to highlight their intimate friends' particularity in friendship practices (see Chapter 4). Therefore, in daily

practices of friendships, children needed to use various ways to prove that the boundaries drawn between themselves and intimate friends were lower than that between themselves and other friends (e.g., ordinary friends and instrumental friends) and peers (e.g., classmates). Children not only kept adjusting boundaries to classify their friends, but also consistently tested the boundaries set by their friends. Testing boundaries was used by children as a way to find out their own position in their friends' peer network (e.g., "Am I his/her best friend?" and "Is he/she closer to XX than me?"). Friends' performances in this boundary adjusting and testing can shape the direction of their friendships (e.g., upgrading or downgrading friendships). Apart from the friendship boundaries set by children themselves, in the school setting, certain other boundaries were "formally" or "official" drawn by the school's organizing system. Children were organized into different "official" collective groups, such as being grouped by class and in working groups. For example, on "regular" school days, intimate friends from different classes can get along very well at school; however, in certain situations (e.g., Children's Day Show competition, see Chapter 7), their identities as members of different class collectives were highlighted and boundaries were drawn between intimate friends. Such boundaries then shaped their friendship practices (e.g., decreasing the frequency of interactions and increasing conflicts, see Chapter 7). This research suggests that children's ongoing negotiation of identities and boundaries between the different practices of friendships in different groups was an important reason that caused children's various, dynamic, and complex friendships at school.

The following section will further clarify and reflect on the implications of these findings for the existing literature, policy and practice, and for future similar studies' methodological and ethical considerations.

## **8.3 Research implications**

### **8.3.1 Implications for the existing literature**

As an ethnographic research focusing on Chinese children's friendships, this study provides rich findings not only on children's definitions of friendship but also on their practices of friendship in their everyday boarding school lives. Through combining its findings with the existing literature (see Chapter 2), this investigation into rural Chinese children's peer friendships at boarding school contributes to friendship studies, childhood studies, and Chinese studies, especially Chinese school studies.

From the perspective of friendship studies, this research contributes to the sociological insistence that friendship, to be interpreted, needs to be placed in multileveled contexts (Adams and Allan, 1998). To construct a multileveled context for these P5 children's peer friendships at school, this thesis involved the following elements. It involved "gender" from the 'personal environment level' (p. 6) of context; "power over relationships" in the existing personal network (e.g., classmates, teachers and parents) from the 'network level' (p. 7) of context; Central Primary School's "school context" from the 'community or subcultural level' (pp. 8) of context; and China's "Confucian-collectivist values" from the 'societal level' (p. 9) of context (Adams and Allan, 1998). This research's findings prove that these multileveled contexts indeed significantly shaped children's constructions of friendships, and that the elements from different levels of context were intimately connected (Adams and Allan, 1998). Specifically, the 'societal level' of context can be the fundamental platform on which to ground elements from other levels of context. At the same time, through exploring what children said about friends/friendships (e.g., idioms) and did in practices of friendships (e.g., gender separation, obedience to teachers/parents), their particular ways of constructing friendships can offer us an additional lens through which to look at the surrounding contexts.

By offering a detailed and vivid picture of how a group of Chinese P5 children contextually define and practise peer friendships in a primary boarding school, this research gives access to a sociological and anthropological understanding of friendships as complex, diverse and dynamic interpersonal relationships constructed in sociocultural contexts (e.g., Bell and Coleman, 1999; Deegan, 2005; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Allan and Adams, 2007; Nayak, 2013). Pahl and Spencer (2004) assert that “friendship” is associated with a range of elements in theory; however, in practice, friendships do not necessarily encompass all theoretical elements and standards. Through discussing the characteristics of intimate friendships, instrumental friendships, and friendships formed on the basis of individuals’ shared identity as “in-group members” (*zijiren*) of the same “collective” (*jiti*), this research adds to the diversity of friendship forms. Through discussing the similarities, differences and close connections between these forms of friendship, this research indicates the complexity of distinguishing forms of friendship in practice. It points out that, amongst these P5 Chinese children, in such a closely connected and educational context, no type of friendship could be described as a “simple” friendship; all of them can be complex and include an interwoven range of socially and culturally contextualized elements. Through illustrating the possible ways in which levels of intimacy between friends might be upgraded or downgraded in friendship practices, this research argues that dynamic conversion can occur amongst these forms of friendship: for example, instrumental friendship can progressively develop into intimate friendship. Consequently, children’s nominations of “friends”, especially best friends, can change over time.

Based on discussions of such complex, diverse and dynamic friendships, this research reinforces the principle that a researcher needs to be sensitive to the complex meanings of “friend” and “friendship” in people’s usage (Allan, 1996; Allan and Adams, 2007; Ryle, 2015). In this research, through exploring children’s usage of the term “friend” in different situations at school, it adds the

insight that in these P5 children's everyday usage, "friend" can serve various purposes. Calling a peer a "friend" can display an intimate bond (e.g., in cases of intimate friendship), show off a connection with "power" or popularity among peers (e.g., in cases of instrumental friendship), or contribute in a sophisticated manner to a friendly, inclusive and harmonious class/school environment (e.g., in friendships shaped by Confucian-collectivist values). Accordingly, this research also points out that friendships in the school context give children a chance to figure out how to make complex compromises, as they struggle over the question of whom or which groups they need to give allegiance to (e.g., themselves, class, school) (see Chapter 7).

From the perspective of childhood studies, children's active, creative and sophisticated negotiations with surrounding contexts in the process of constructing friendships with peers at school adds a China-based example to endorse the insightful conceptualization of children and childhood offered by the "new" sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 2003; Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2015). This research reviews how the children accommodated themselves to the surrounding contexts by following certain "rules" (e.g., gender separation) for forming friendships, taught by teachers/parents or required by the contexts, but simultaneously used friendships as a resource in practices that challenge such "rules" (e.g., heterosexual romantic adventures). Through this review, this study confirms that children are capable and active in the 'construction and determination of their own social lives' (James and Prout, 2003:8). It also supports a claim that, as independent individuals and active agents, these children do not always accommodate adults' teaching in practice even though obedience to adults is stressed as a moral principle within China's Confucian values.

In addition, through showing children's sophistication and creativity in practices of friendships and other peer relationships, this research provides abundant evidences to challenge the stigmatized stereotype of rural Chinese children's "less-developed" capabilities in relationship management in mainstream

Chinese literature and media (see Chapter 1 and 2). Although this study points out that these children indeed need some support to gain better experiences of relationships with others (e.g., see Chapter 6), it indicates that these children's capabilities to actively respond to and negotiate the surrounding contexts in the process of understanding and practising relationships with others should not be underestimated.

Moreover, in this research, exploration of these Chinese P5 children's everyday friendships at school offers insight into the school lives of Chinese rural children. For example, it introduced children's relationships with parents, teachers and school peers (e.g., classmates, groupmates and roommates) and unpacked the gender culture, Confucian-collectivist moral education scheme, achievement-oriented evaluation system, and school organizing mechanism that children experienced at school. Therefore, this research not only contributes to the understanding of rural Chinese children's friendships at school, but also adds a picture of these rural children's school lives in their unique Chinese childhood. A comparison between such findings and outcomes of research into children's school lives in other countries can contribute to our understanding of the 'complexities and interconnections of childhood in a globalising world' (Tisdall and Punch, 2012:260). In this case, as a study benefitting from the literature of friendship studies and childhood studies (see Chapter 2), its findings in turn can offer a Chinese case to contribute to the richness, diversification and globalization of literature in these fields.

In addition, this research contributes to the development of English language literature on ethnographic studies in Chinese school settings. The research offers detailed discussions about the Chinese school context, such as children's school experiences in a Chinese rural boarding school and the embedded socio-cultural norms in the Chinese school setting. Furthermore, as indicated in Chapter 3 and in section 8.3.3 of this Conclusion, the detailed and reflexive record of my ethnographic fieldwork process in the field offer

methodological and ethical implications for further school ethnographies in the Chinese context. For example, this research offers examples of possible methodological and ethical challenges caused by hierarchy and bureaucracy that researchers can experience if they gain access to Chinese school settings with support from higher-level authorities (see sections 3.6 and 8.3.3).

### **8.3.2 Implications for policy and practice**

This thesis provides insights that help us to understand both what rural Chinese pupils' peer friendships look like in a boarding school and how the surrounding contexts and significant others (e.g., other school peers, teachers and parents) influence their friendships. By presenting the contextual challenges and risks experienced by these children in the processes of forming and practising friendships, this research offers an example on the basis of which to remind policymakers, scholars, teachers and practitioners of the importance of offering children proper relationship education and support, besides rethinking the shortages of existing policies and practices affecting these children.

As described in Chapter 2, increasing reports of children's and young people's misbehaviour and negative experiences (e.g., school bullying, abuse, and suicide) in relationships with others, such as parents, teachers, and peers, have raised great concern in Chinese society about children's, especially rural Chinese children's, social and emotional capacities for dealing with others. For example, with the aim of improving children's ability to establish positive relationships with others, since 2011, a Social and Emotional Learning Project (SEL Project) has been imported from Western developed countries, and been piloted and officially practised in rural schools in China (UNICEF, 2019, see Chapter 2). As a study that includes detailed discussions of rural Chinese children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school, this research can be used as a knowledge resource to contribute to the development of this China-based SEL Project from a friendship-focused



perspective. For instance, this research highlights the importance of ensuring that, in the processes of conducting teachers' training and designing social and emotional learning course modules and materials (see Chapter 2) on the topic of children's peer friendships at school, the complexities and diversity of friendships are well recognized and accommodated. In addition, this research points to some issues, such as negative emotions experienced when in conflict with or breaking up with friends (see Chapters 4 and 5), exploitation arising in friendships with power imbalance (see Chapter 6), etc., which can be included in teachers' training, course modules and materials as the issues likely to be experienced by children in their practices of friendship. Moreover, as will be discussed in the following section 8.3.3, this research can serve as a resource offering local professionals and practitioners methodological and ethical support in their local explorations of children's contextualized needs within the SEL Project.

This research warns that some school organizing and management approaches might need to be reflected upon because they were suspected of undermining children's wellbeing at school. The study particularly stresses the importance of rethinking the student leader system, a widely used student organizing system in China (see also Bakken, 2000; Gao, 2012; Hansen, 2012, 2015; Schoenhals, 2016), as well as the dormitory provision and management (see also Pang and Han, 2005; Ye and Pan, 2008).

At Central Primary School, as noted in teachers' training materials and meetings, the student leader system was officially constructed as an approach to empowering children and increasing their involvement in everyday school organization and management. Given student leaders' active role in maintaining good order in school/class, to some extent it can be viewed as a means of respecting children's right to participate 'in all matters affecting the child' (Article 12, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989). However, some aspects of the student leader system do not align with the spirit of child participation. The current system fails to offer all

children equal opportunities to become student leaders. The idea of child participation as laid out in the UNCRC entails appreciation of every child's ability as a social actor and agent (James and Prout, 2003; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002; Moss and Petrie, 2002). But instead of treating each child equally, the student leader system provides more opportunities to the high-achieving children with good academic performance (see also Hansen, 2015). This system denies some children (e.g., low-achieving ones with relatively weak academic performance) the opportunity to make their "voices" heard (White, 1996; Tisdall, 2013ab). In addition, Article 12 in the UNCRC (1989) highlights the importance of ensuring that children have 'the right to express those views freely'; furthermore, as General Comment No.12 explains, 'freely' means that 'the child has the right to express her or his own views and not the views of others' (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009:10). However, as emerged in Chapters 6 and 7, in Central Primary School the main task of student leaders was to implement the school's rules and conduct surveillance on behalf of the teachers, rather than enter into dialogue with the school's administration as spokespersons for the children themselves, representing their needs and feelings at school. Therefore, to some extent, it might be necessary to ask whose "voices" the student leader system highlights.

Moreover, this system has the negative consequence of strengthening a hierarchical relationship between student leaders and their fellow students (see Chapter 6). This hierarchical arrangement, in turn, could have negative consequences for children's experiences of peer relationships. For example, some student leaders might misuse their power to exploit some fellow students (see Chapter 6). Apart from fellow students, student leaders' own wellbeing at school can sometimes be undermined by the system. Although their position as student leaders can give children power over other peers, this might not be a joyful experience. In some cases, it can be very stressful because of the student leaders experiencing 'dual pressures from teachers and fellow students' (Hansen, 2015:105) and facing interpersonal relationship crises (see

Chapters 6 and 7) when managing their dual roles as teachers' surveillance assistants and fellow students' classmates/friends. Therefore, this research points out the need to be aware of the risky consequences for student leaders' and fellow students' wellbeing at school when the student leader system is applied within a school's organizational and management mechanisms.

Regarding children's dormitory lives as examined in this research, the most prominent problem was the system's poor facilities (see also Yue et al., 2014). Each dormitory room was shared by around 20 children, each of whom had to share a mattress with a same-gender roommate (see Chapter 6). In this crowded context, children have very little privacy and a relatively poor quality of life. Apart from dormitory facilities, dormitory management in Central Primary School also raised some concerns. The school's decision to create peer support by arranging for younger children to live with older ones was well intentioned. On the one hand, such mixing of ages in dormitory rooms can support the younger ones' everyday lives and contribute to cross-age friendships, besides sometimes affording younger children protection from bullying. On the other hand, a power imbalance caused by age difference might increase the risk of younger children being exploited in interactions with older children (see Chapter 6). In addition, as noted also by other scholars (e.g., Ye and Pan, 2008), this research indicated Chinese rural boarding schools' ignorance of and failure to consider residential children's needs and feelings when setting up dormitory management rules, such as the "no talking" rule. As noted in Chapter 6, children were not allowed to talk and play after lights out, and rule-breakers would be criticized (*piping*). However, as the children commonly complained, and as evidenced when they introduced their "secret play" in the evenings (see Chapter 6), the "no talking" rule was 'impossible' to adhere to because they always felt excited when just coming out of evening self-study and found it difficult to sleep immediately after lights

out<sup>96</sup>. Children were also required to follow the “no talking” rule when eating in the canteen (see Chapter 3). In this case, the “no talking” rule in student management, as criticized by Ye and Pan (2008), prioritized the goal of keeping students in quiet order over the children’s need to chat with peers, and imposed the discomfort felt when forced to follow an ‘impossible’ rule. Therefore, this research suggests that, when improving children’s dormitory lives, consideration should be given to the potential risks of harming the children through insufficient privacy, exposure to power imbalance in mixed-ages dormitory rooms, and neglect of children’s needs and feelings when setting up management rules.

In sum, this research has implications for the contextualization of the SEL Project, and for reconsideration of Chinese schools’ organizing and management mechanisms, with a particular focus on the risks present in the student leader system and in dormitory provision and management.

### **8.3.3 Implications for future research: methods and ethics**

Responding to China’s lack of ethnographic studies on children’s peer friendships at school and of discussions of ethics in studies with children (see Chapter 2), this study’s experiences of and reflections on how to use ethnographic approaches to the study of children’s friendships while maintaining ethical standards in a Chinese educational setting can offer methodological and ethical implications for future studies.

This research advocates that ethnographic approaches are useful for studying children’s relationships with others in childhood, particularly through drawing out ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of their vivid experiences of actively negotiating with surrounding contexts to construct these relationships in daily interactions. It further suggests that a combination of ethnographic approaches,

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<sup>96</sup> See the school’s timetable in Appendix II. In the evening, children finished self-study at 7:50 pm, arrived at their dormitory rooms for roll call at 8:05 pm and turned off the lights at 8:20 pm. Therefore, only a half hour was left between the end of evening self-study and lights out.

such as participant observation and ethnographic conversations, and formal interviews, can be effective in studying the complexity and diversity of children's peer friendships at school (see Chapter 3). Since peers and teachers can provide children not only with companions but also with constant witnesses and surveillance in the crowded school setting (e.g., Thorne, 1993), what children *say* and what children *do* in public/private and formal/informal occasions can vary (see examples in Chapters 5 and 6). Therefore, combined methods can offer the researcher a good opportunity to obtain comparable data. Through analysing both consistent and contradictory data emerging from comparisons, researchers can gain insight into exploring and identifying the complex opinions children form and the various strategies they apply in the process of accommodating or resisting surrounding contexts.

This research also reiterates the importance of being aware that the ethnographer's characteristics and personal experiences can significantly shape research output (e.g., Davies, 2008). To re-emphasize and add to Chapter 3's reflexivity section, here I want to highlight two issues that one might need to consider when doing ethnographic studies with Chinese children or in a familiar context. Firstly, given that the need to show obedience to teachers' and parents' instructions has been strengthened by Chinese Confucian moral principles (see Chapter 7), the unbalanced power relationship between child participants and adult researchers might not be entirely erased (see Chapter 3). Hence, this research calls for awareness that, in the presence of adult researchers, Chinese children might unconsciously or consciously edit their answers in line with their teachers' and parents' tutelage (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7). For example, in my research, children showed a tendency to highlight the positive and instrumental aspects of friendship and to nominate "good" classmates as their friends so as to give me the impression that they were good children (*hao haizi*) who had taken in (*tinghua*) their teachers' and parents' instructions about what constituted a "good" friendship and a "good" friend (see Chapter 7). This concern over the influence of the adults-children

power relationship on children's answers in data collection further evidences that ethnography is 'a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood' (James and Prout, 2003:8). The reason is that, in relatively long-time ethnographic fieldwork, researchers can not only continuously negotiate relationships with child participants to adjust the power relationship between them, but can also use participant observation (what children *do*) to cross-check what children say (see Chapter 3).

Secondly, the importance of managing "closeness" and "distance" in ethnography has been discussed in Chapter 3 with the focus not only on managing multiple relationships between the fieldworker and locals but also on the unequal social and political power between different groups of people in the field (see also Svensson, 2006; Thøgersen, 2006). Besides these focuses on relationships and power, my ethnographic experience suggests that when ethnographers are familiar with the contexts of their fieldwork, it is important to be aware that "closeness" might restrict their "sensitivity" in data collection. For example, in this research, as a Chinese person who grew up in Mainland China, the language, culture and knowledge of Chinese school life that I shared helped me to easily understand my research participants and the surrounding contexts. However, at the same time, this "closeness" presented me with the challenge of maintaining good "sensitivity" with which to recognize and question certain "taken-for-granted" social and cultural phenomena and values in data collection. For example, due to my school experiences in China, I was familiar with the student leader system and was even accustomed to seeing "good" students supervise "bad" students. Thus, in my data collection process, I recognized that, without the critical "lens" I had gained from previously read literature on subjects of equality, children's rights, and the influence of power-over relationships on children's wellbeing (see Chapter 2), together with continuing reflexivity in the field (see Chapter 3), it would not have been easy for me to challenge these "taken-for-granted" experiences and rethink what these school organizational and management mechanisms mean

to children (see section 8.3.2). Thus, this ethnographic experience suggests that, when ethnographers are familiar with the context of the study, a critical lens gained from literature, along with reflexivity, is crucial for improving their “sensitivity” to data in the field.

Apart from the above methodological applications, this research contains some ethical implications for future studies. As a contribution to the sparse discussion of ethics in studies with children in China, this research not only outlines its process of applying ethical considerations in practice but also reflects on the challenges experienced while doing so (see Chapter 3). Therefore, this study warns the researcher to avoid the risk of “tokenism” in the process of gaining children’s informed consent. By “tokenism” is meant procedures in which, on the surface, children independently sign and submit the informed consent form, but their right to freely convey their own willingness or unwillingness to participate in the research has actually been undermined. In the Chinese context, as emerged from both the literature and this study’s fieldwork experiences, children in the school setting were required to be collective-oriented and to obey teachers’ requirements (see Chapter 7). Hence, as discussed in Chapter 3 (section 3.6), when some children gave informed consent to participate in my research, their decisions might have been made not in their own interests but more in response to their teachers’ suggestions that they give me a positive impression of their collective groups’ (e.g., class and school) willingness to cooperate and help others. Therefore, this research argues that, in the Chinese context, it is far more important to treat informed consent as an ongoing process throughout the fieldwork rather than as a one-off task (Gallagher, 2009a). Only in this way can researchers find opportunities to check children’s “true” thoughts and offer them the chance to rethink their decisions. In addition, through reflecting on experiences of my ethical agreement with teachers not being taken seriously in practice (see Chapter 3), this research suggests that an even more serious ethical agreement needs to

be reached with significant gatekeepers, such as teachers, before starting to recruit children.

Although these two strategies can be helpful, they might not enable researchers to completely avoid the risk of “tokenism” in the practice of ethics. According to conversations with both children and teachers in the field, the ideas of ethics in research and children’s rights were very rarely encountered by them. In that case, the underdeveloped awareness of the content and importance of children’s rights and ethical principles in work with children in China (e.g., Wang, 2007; Zheng, 2011, 2012a) may be a fundamental reason for the occurrence of such ethical dilemmas in practice. Therefore, as a supplement to this study’s implications for policy and practice, it issues an urgent call for wide dissemination of the ideas of respecting children’s rights and following ethical protocols when working with children in China. It maintains that only when these ideas are truly accepted and implemented in China will researchers be able to conduct fieldwork with children while facing fewer ethical dilemmas.

In sum, although different researchers’ fieldwork experiences of applying methods and implementing ethical considerations can vary with their different roles and relationships in the field (Burgess, 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), the methodological and ethical implications of this research can still be a useful resource, inspiring other scholars’ choices of methods and ethical practice plans in studies of Chinese children’s relationships with others at school.

Following this section’s (8.3) discussions of this study’s implications for existing literature, policy and practice, and for future similar studies’ methodological and ethical considerations, the next section will conclude by discussing the successful aspects of this research, and will then reflect on the missing aspects that can be developed in a further research agenda.



## 8.4 Concluding reflections

As the study of children's friendships at school is a relatively "new" topic in the context of China, there was limited literature to guide this research from theoretical, methodological and ethical perspectives. However, thanks to the implications of Western-based sociological childhood studies and friendship studies, I overcame this limitation and successfully designed a child-centred ethnographic research with which to answer my research questions. Then, I dealt with time limitations during the ethnographic fieldwork by applying multiple methods to boost the intensity of data collection. Based on its rich ethnographic data, this research draws a vivid picture of a group of P5 Chinese pupils' peer friendships in the context of a rural boarding school, and investigates how the surrounding contexts contribute to these children's particular ways of constructing and practising friendships.

As a qualitative study, based on a time-limited ethnography in one research setting, the generalizability of its research findings might face criticism (Greener, 2011; Bryman, 2012). However, as argued in discussions of the study's aim and methodological positions, it is clear that this research did not seek to represent "all" rural Chinese pupils' understandings and experiences of peer friendships in boarding school (see Chapters 2 and 3). Rather, it seeks to use 'thick' ethnographic findings (Geertz, 1973) to offer some insights into the wider landscape of rural Chinese children's friendships at school. From this perspective, this research's output indeed contributes to the development of knowledge about Chinese rural children's understandings and experiences of friendships in the context of a primary boarding school, by providing a range of theoretical, methodological and ethical implications. Moreover, through presenting the complexity and diversity of friendships in these children's school lives in their Chinese childhood, this research extends our understanding of the concepts of "friends", "friendship" and "childhood", which thus far have been mainly based on Western perspectives. Therefore, it contributes to the international development of knowledge in the fields of sociological and

anthropological friendship studies and childhood studies by adding a Chinese case. This research also contributes to China's policies and practices for supporting children's social and emotional capacity to deal with relationships with others. Through offering detailed discussions about the characteristics of children's peer friendships at school, the challenges they experienced in friendship practices, and the risky aspects of school's organizational and management systems, this study's output gives Chinese scholars, policymakers and teachers a chance to rethink ways of contextualizing and adjusting current services to help these rural children to improve their friendship experiences at school.

However, this research also indicates some unfilled gaps that can be worked on in further research. I particularly want to suggest three directions. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 3, although this research strove to give equal attention to boys and girls, a gender limitation still exists. As emerged in the findings chapters, in comparison to boys, girls received greater attention in the field and were more prominent in the results. Therefore, in further studies, it will be necessary to improve the engagement with boys so as to offer more insights into boys' friendships at school. Given my experiences of being restricted to gendered places at school, such as dormitory rooms, I believe male scholars might have advantages in seeking to fill this gap. However, for female scholars, although gender identity might constrain observations in some gendered places, I believe that more intensive conversations with boys could, to some extent, help by offering abundant talk-based data to supplement the missing amount of observation-based data.

Secondly, to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of rural Chinese children's friendships in the boarding school context, comparative studies are needed. To be specific, "comparative studies" here means comparisons between children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships in rural boarding schools, rural day schools, urban boarding schools and urban day schools. Through these comparisons, it would be

possible to point out more clearly the specific characteristics of rural Chinese children's peer friendships at boarding school. Apart from school types and school locations (urban or rural), some other characteristics, such as the influence of age difference on children's understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school might also be taken into account.

Thirdly, as discussed in Chapter 3, I only conducted interviews with a few children's guardians. In this project, since I had abundant informal conversations with parents about their thoughts on children's friendships at school, a combination of interview data and other informal conversations helped me to explore parents' influences on children's school friendships (see Chapter 7). However, being inspired by Tamis-LeMonda and colleagues' (2008) interview-based research on the dynamic coexistence of individualism and collectivism as reflected in parents' goals for children, in future I can boost my data through more interviews with parents and grandparents. In such interviews I can ask parents, for example, not only to talk about how they educate their children about peer friendships at school, but also to recall their own parents' teaching about friendships at school. This might help me to explore Chinese people's understandings and experiences of peer friendships at school over generations during the social process of individualization taking place in China (e.g. Yan, 2010; Hansen, 2015; Wang, 2019).

Moreover, a new research interest also emerged from this Ph.D. study. This child-centred research suggests that children are capable of actively engaging with and re-constructing their school experiences in profound ways. As suggested by discussions throughout the four findings chapters, the children demonstrated sophisticated attitudes and creative approaches in their employment of "friendship" as a tool to deal with their relationships with surrounding peers and thereby enhance their school experiences. Therefore, it might be possible to explore further how children themselves could be involved as a resource in dealing with the problems they face every day, such

as bullying in school, and thus improve the quality of their own lives (see also Cowie, 1998; Christensen and James, 2008; Yin et al., 2017) at school.

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## Appendix I

# Glossary

### B

*bajie* 巴结

*bagua* 八卦

*ban* 班

*ban jiti* 班集体

*banji rongyu* 班级荣誉

*ban zhuren* 班主任

*banzhang* 班长

*bei xinniàng* 背新娘

*biantai* 变态

*biaomianshang* 表面上

*biaoxian* 表现

*biaoxin hao* 表现好

*bangzhu* 帮助

*bugei mianzi* 不给面子

*bu tinghua* 不听话

*bujiankang* 不健康

### C

*cedian bingxiao* 撤点并校

*cha sheng* 差生

*chengzhang jilu shouce* 成长记录手册

*chunjie* 纯洁

### D

*dajia doushi pengyou* 大家都是朋友

*dawo* 大我

*danguande* 当官的

*deyu* 德育

*diwei* 地位

*Di Zi Gui* 弟子规

*dingzui* 顶嘴

*diuren* 丢人

*diu mianzi* 丢面子

*diu ta fumu de lian* 丢他父母的脸

*dui ziji you bangzhu* 对自己有帮助

*duo jiao pengyou, jiao hao pengyou* 多交朋友，交好朋友

## **F**

*fangyan* 方言

*fumu hu, ying wuhuan; fumu ming, xing wulan; fumu jiao, xu jingting, fumu ze, xu shuncheng* 父母呼，应勿缓；父母命，行勿懒；父母教，须敬听；父母责，须顺承

*fu chuji* 副处级

*fu banzhang* 副班长

## **G**

*gaokao* 高考

*geren* 个人

*goutuizi* 狗腿子

*guojia zhongchangqi jiaoyugaige he fazhan guihuagangyao* 国家中长期教育改革发展规划纲要

*guan* 管

*guanxi* 关系

*guanxin* 关心

## H

*hanyu pinyin* 汉语拼音

*hao pengyou* 好朋友

*hexie* 和谐

*hezuo jingshen* 合作精神

*hongbao* 红包

*huibao* 回报

*hukou* 户口

*huxiang bangzhu* 互相帮助

## J

*jiazhang hui* 家长会

*jiantao shu* 检讨书

*jifen ben* 计分本

*jiangtai* 讲台

*jiafen* 加分

*jiejie* 姐姐

*jincheng dagong* 进城打工

*jiti* 集体

*jiti liyi* 集体利益

*jichu jiaoyu kecheng gaige gangyao* 基础教育课程改革纲要

*jisu xuexiao* 寄宿学校

*jisu sheng* 寄宿生

*jin zhu zhe chi, jin mo zhe hei* 近朱者赤，近墨者黑

## K

*kaocha* 考察

*kedaibiao* 课代表

*koufen* 扣分

## **L**

*lao pengyou* 老朋友

*laobaixing* 老百姓

*leyu zhuren* 乐于助人

*leyu zhuren, tuanjie youai* 乐于助人，团结友爱

*Lei Feng* 雷锋

*liyi duben* 礼仪读本

*liu mang* 流氓

*liushou ertong* 留守儿童

*luyao zhi mali, rijiu jian renxin* 路遥知马力，日久见人心

## **M**

*mapijing* 马屁精

*mimi* 秘密

*meimei* 妹妹

*mianzi* 面子

## **N**

*nansheng pa nvsheng* 男生怕女生

*nannu shoushou buqin* 男女授受不亲

*nao dongfang* 闹洞房

*niangniang qiang* 娘娘腔

*ni gan bu gan?* 你敢不敢？

*nvqiang nanruo* 女强男弱

## **P**

*pengyou* 朋友

*pengbei qunti* 朋辈群体

*piping* 批评

*piqi hao* 脾气好

*pinde hao* 品德好

*pinde yu shehui* 品德与社会

*putonghua* 普通话

## **Q**

*qiangyou* 强友

*qinxue* 勤学

*qinmi de pengyou* 亲密的朋友

## **R**

*reai jiti* 热爱集体

*renqing* 人情

*ruoyou* 弱友

## **S**

*Sanzi Jing* 三字经

*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观

*shifan xueyuan* 师范学院

*shouji* 守纪

*shuoyitao zuoyitao* 说一套做一套

*suzhi* 素质

*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育

## **T**

*taren* 他人

*taohao* 讨好

*tongban* 同伴

*tongxuelu* 同学录

*tongzhuo* 同桌

*toukao nvsheng* 投靠女生

*tinghua* 听话

*tuanjie* 团结

*tuanjie tongxue* 团结同学

## **W**

*wairen* 外人

*wan* 玩

*wenrou* 温柔

*women zhongde yiyuan* 我们中的一员

## **X**

*xiaowo* 小我

*xiaozuzhang* 小组长

*xiaoxuesheng shouze* 小学生守则

*xiaoxuesheng richang xingwei guifan* 小学生日常行为规范

*xiaoshun* 孝顺

*xiaoshun fumu* 孝顺父母

*xihuan* 喜欢

*xie zuowen* 写作文

*xinzhong you taren, xinzhong you jiti* 心中有他人, 心中有集体

*xingwei jizaiben* 行为记载本

*xiong* 凶

*xuesheng ganbu* 学生干部

*xuexi weiyuan* 学习委员

## **Y**

*yao* 妖

*youyi* 友谊

*youxiu* 优秀

*youshan* 友善

*youai* 友爱

*youxiu shaoxianduiyuan* 优秀少先队员

*youxiu de* 优秀的

*youdeng sheng* 优等生

*youxiu xuesheng* 优秀学生

*youxiu xiaozu* 优秀小组

*youxiu banji* 优秀班级

*yishi tongren* 一视同仁

*yiri weishi, zhongshen weifu* 一日为师，终身为父

*yiqi wan* 一起玩

*yin* 阴

*yang* 阳

*yinsheng yangshuai* 阴盛阳衰

*yingshi jiaoyu* 应试教育

*yuanfen* 缘分

*yuan* 缘

## **Z**

*zaolian* 早恋

zaoshu 早熟

zaoyao 造谣

zaijia kao fumu, chumen kao pengyou 在家靠父母，出门靠朋友

ziji 自己

zijiren 自己人

zhanglian 长脸

zhengguang 争光

zhe bu zhishi ni yigeren de shiqing 这不是你一个人的事情

zhengyou 诤友

zhengchang 正常

zhirisheng 值日生

zhongzhuan 中专

zhongse qingyou 重色轻友

zhongdeng sheng 中等生

zhongguo xuesheng fazhan hexin suyang 中国学生发展核心素养

zhongguo shehuizhuyi de jiebanren 中国特色社会主义接班人

zhongguo jiaoyu gaige he fazhan gangyao 中国教育改革和发展纲要

zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin  
weichengnianren sixiang daode jianshe de ruogan yijian 中共中央国务院关于  
进一步加强和改进未成年人思想道德建设的若干意见

zhongxuesheng shouze 中学生守则

zhongxuesheng richang xingwei guifan 中学生日常行为规范

zhongxiao xuesheng shouze 中小学生守则

zhuren weile 助人为乐

zikong 自控

zuihao de pengyou 最好的朋友



*zunjing shizhang* 尊敬师长

## Appendix II

### Summer timetable for students of Central Primary School

The table below shows the school's summer timetable, in operation from 24th April to July 2016 as an example<sup>97</sup>.

Time	Task	Time	Task
7:00 am	Getting up	2:20 pm – 3:00 pm	Fifth lesson
7:15 am – 7:55 am	Breakfast & school cleaning	3:00 pm – 3:10 pm	Eye exercises
7:55 am – 8:05 am	Morning reading	3:10 pm – 3:50 pm	Sixth lesson
8:05 am – 8:15 am	Morning meeting	3:50 pm -4:20 pm	Gymnastic exercises
8:25 am – 9:05 am	First lesson	4:20 pm – 5:00 pm	Subjects/Clubs
9:15 am – 9:55 am	Second lesson	5:00 pm – 5:40 pm	Reading
10:00 am – 10:30 am	Gymnastic exercises	5:40 pm – 6:50 pm	Dinner& shower & laundry & school cleaning
10:30 am – 11:10 am	Third lesson	6:50 pm – 7:50 pm	Evening self-study
11:20 am – 12:00 am	Fourth lesson	8:05 pm	Dormitory roll-call
12:00 am – 12:50 pm	Lunch	8:20 pm	Dormitory lights out
12:50 pm – 2:00 pm	Midday rest		

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<sup>97</sup> To note, the winter and summer timetables differ mainly in terms of getting up time, midday rest time and sleep time.

## Appendix III: Research Information Leaflet (Adult)

### Research Information Leaflet



#### Research Topic:

How do Chinese rural children of migrant parent(s) experience and understand peer friendships?

#### About the researcher

Hi, my name is Yan Zhu and I am a PhD candidate in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh. I come from Hubei Province, China. My email address is [redacted]@qq.com. My mobile phone number is [redacted]. My QQ number is [redacted]. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this research.

#### About this research

Chinese Scholarship Council funds this research from 2015 to 2018. This research aims to explore Chinese rural children of migrant parent(s) experience and understand peer friendships.

To collect data for this research, I will be in [redacted] Township for around 5 months from end of February to the end of July 2016. Within this period, I will work with children in both [redacted] Primary School and other communities in [redacted] Township. In weekdays, I will join children's school activities to interact and observe them mainly on campus, such as in their classrooms, canteen, and hallways and on playgrounds. In weekends, I will also organize some research-related after-school activities, such as drawing and storytelling, and do house visits.

#### Do children have to participate in this research?

No. This is not a school work, thus, it is all up to children themselves to decide their participation! Even my research focuses on children of migrant parent(s) as core participants, all other children are welcomed to participate in this research in any time. Also, children are free to withdraw from participating and leave this project in any time.

#### Anonymity and Confidentiality

All participants' personal details and information will be anonymized. All your personal information will be replaced by pseudonyms in my fieldnote, PhD thesis and presentation. All information provided by participants will be kept confidentially and will only be able to be accessed to by my supervisors and me. However, there is an exception to confidentiality. If I am worried some children are being significantly harmed, I will involve some qualified people to protect and help them.

#### What will happen after this project?

After I finish this project, I will try to revisit all my participants and organize a seminar in [redacted] Primary School to share my findings with you. All my participants are welcomed! If I could not find time to come back, I will summarize my research findings to use Chinese to write a summary report (or a video-recorded presentation) and send it to [redacted] Primary School. All my participants can access to these materials.

Thank you very much for reading this research leaflet!

## 《研究介绍书》



### 研究课题

中国农村留守儿童是如何体验和认识朋辈友谊？

### 研究员信息

大家好，我叫朱颜，湖北省当阳市人。现阶段受国家留学基金委资助，以公派生身份在英国爱丁堡大学攻读社会政策博士学位。

如果您在阅读完本介绍书内容之后，有任何的疑虑，请联系我！我的邮箱地址为：[REDACTED]@qq.com. QQ 号：[REDACTED]. 电话号码为：[REDACTED].

### 研究简介

《中国农村留守儿童是如何体验和认识朋辈友谊？》研究课题受中国国家留学基金委资助。课题开展时间为 2015 年至 2018 年。本课题旨在探索中国农村留守儿童通过在日常生活中与同龄人互动，是如何理解朋辈友谊，在朋辈群体中间有什么样的日常经历。

为了搜集数据展开分析，我将于 2016 年 2 月底到 7 月底，共 5 个月的时间中，扎根于 [REDACTED] 镇，进行实地调研。在这段时间中，我主要的研究场所为 [REDACTED] 小学，但也会根据研究需要走访本地社区和周边乡镇。日常的研究工作内容为：周一到周五，我将参与 [REDACTED] 小学 1-2 个班级（4 到 6 年级班级，具体班级待定）的日常学校活动，包括上课，吃饭，自由活动等等。周六到周日，我将开展一些与研究有关的课外兴趣活动，包括画画，讲故事，看动画等等。同时，我也会利用周六周日，在征求孩子和家长的同意之后，进行一些家访活动，进一步了解留守儿童的家庭生活。

### 研究参与：孩子是否一定需要参与研究？

本次研究不属于学校教学或者学习任务。研究对象招募是依照完全自愿的原则，完全尊重所有研究对象的个人意愿。参与研究的儿童可以在研究的任何时段，自由退出或者重新返回研究。虽然本次研究的主要关注点是留守儿童，但是我非常欢迎所有的孩子加入。

### 信息匿名与保密

所有研究对象的姓名和个人信息都会被匿名处理。例如，我的田野笔记和最后的博士论文中，凡是涉及的研究对象的姓名都会被以假名替换。所有在 [REDACTED] 镇收集到的资料都会被安全地妥善保管，除了我的博士导师能够见到一些经过匿名处理和翻译过的原始资料以外，只有我才能查阅。但是，信息匿名与保密原则在遇到特殊伦理问题时适当进行调整。例如，如果我在调查中发现有儿童在日常生活中受到了严重的心理或者生理伤害，我会将该儿童的部分信息与专业儿童保护人员进行共享，以求给受伤儿童提供及时和专业的帮助。

### 研究后续进展

在研究结束之后，我会回访 [REDACTED] 镇，并在 [REDACTED] 小学举办一次交流答谢会，和所有研究的参与者们分享研究成果。如果返回 [REDACTED] 镇的计划不能实现，我将会用一份简单的报告（或者录影）对我的研究成果进行概述，并寄送到 [REDACTED] 小学，所有的研究参与者都可以自由地读取和观看相关内容。

感谢各位在百忙中抽出时间阅读这一份研究说明！

## Appendix IV: Research Information Leaflet (Children)

### My Daily Stories with Friends after Parental Migration

Hey everyone,

My name is Yan Zhu, I feel so happy to meet you all!



I am a RESEARCHER, what is a researcher? Researchers are people who have questions and look for answers! This time, I really need your help!

Because the question which I am looking for is about:

#### Children's Friendship Experiences with Peers

your parent(s) are migrant workers; if your friends' parent(s) are migrant workers; or you have heard about stories about some peers whose parent arent(s), please join me! I would like to know your life, your friends, and your feeling and your stories!



\* All your information will be anonymized and kept confidentially! But, if you experience some serious harassments and would like me to help, I will share your matters with qualified people to find out the best way to support you!\*



**TIME:** From the end of February 2016 to the end of July 2016

**LOCATION:** [redacted] Township and [redacted] Primary School

**METHODS:** In weekdays - I will have class with you, eat with you, and chat with you, and play with you on campus; in weekends, I will organize some research-related activities, such as drawing, storytelling and watching cartoon. If you would be happy, I also can visit your home in weekends to have a nice weekend together!



[redacted]



[redacted]@qq.com



[redacted]

**If you would like to join this research or have any concerns, please feel free to contact me!**  
**(ATTENTION: THIS IS NOT A SCHOOL WORK! YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SAY YES!)**



## 爸爸妈妈出门在外的日子里，我和小伙伴们们的故事



小朋友们，大家好！

我叫朱颜，很高兴能够见到大家！

我是一个研究员，那研究员是什么呢？研究员就是一个带着问题寻找答案的人。这一次，我非常需要你们的帮助！因为我想要解答的问题是关于：

### 儿童之间的友谊



如果你的爸爸妈妈因为工作不在身边；如果你的朋友有不在身边的父母；又或者你听说过爸爸妈妈出门在外的小伙伴的故事，就请加入我的研究吧！  
小朋友们，请你们做我的小小向导！带我回到儿童的世界，去了解：  
你的生活，你的朋友，你的心情还有你的故事！



！！大家所有的信息都会被严格保密，但是如果你遇到了一些很严重的困难，并且需要我的帮助，我就会邀请你一同与负责学生安全的老师进行商讨，找出最好的方法来帮助你！！



时间：2016年的2月底到2016年的7月底

地点：[redacted]小学

方式：我会住在[redacted]小学的教师公寓里，周一到周五，我会跟你们一起上课，一起吃饭，一起聊天，一起玩耍！周末，我会组织一些课外活动，包括画画，讲故事，看动画等等！如果你们愿意，我还希望在周末的时候去你们的家里探望和你们一起度过快乐的周末。



[redacted]



[redacted]@qq.com



[redacted]

如果你愿意加入或者有任何问题，就请联系我吧！  
(注意！这不是课程任务！不要勉强自己加入！)

## Appendix V: Parental/Guardians Informed Consent Form

### Parental/Guardians Informed Consent Form

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Thank you very much for reading this parental informed consent form!

As ethical required in child-related research, it is necessary for a researcher to confirm all child participants' parental permission before involving them in research. Before move to the following parts, please read the information leaflet carefully for some basic information about this research.

#### 1. Research Methods

As mentioned in research information leaflet, this study consists of an around 5 months ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, informal chat, and focus group and individual interviews, and activities.

*Participated observation and Informal chat:* I will join your child's school activities on campus in weekdays to observe and record how they react with their peers in different settings, such as classrooms, hallway, and canteen and dormitory. During the observation time, I will also interact with your child to play and chat with them. My records in observation will include hand-written field notes, photos, and audios, and videos.

*Focus group and Individual interview:* Focus group and individual interviews will be conduct in the second part of the fieldwork time, which approximately from beginning of May. I will run focus group on campus while individual interviews on campus or at children's home. All focus groups and individual interviews will be audio-recorded unless children reject.

*Activities:* I will run research-related activities in whole research process. For example, your child will be asked to draw some pictures or write some essays to talk about his/her stories with peers/friends. In this kind of activities, children may have some products, such as drawing and writing work and crafts. I am happy to collect those works, but he/she/they are welcomed to keep their drawing and writing works, if they do, I will take pictures of their works to store them.

#### 2. Benefits

I will give your child a thank-you gift, such as a notebook or other stationery, at the end of my research. Also, if he/she supports my research as research advisors I will not thank them in the part of acknowledgement in my dissertation but also give them more thank-you gifts, such as a book. Moreover, as a child-centred research, I highlight children's involvement and respect their opinions. Thus, your child will be empowered in this research to be actively involved with their voice heard and weighted. This active research-related experience might confident them when cooperating with other adults in the future.

#### 3. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Pseudonyms will be used to replace your child's name in all materials, including fieldnote, research diaries and PhD thesis. Audio files will be stored confidentially. However, if I am worried about your child/is at significant harm, I will involve qualified people in to protect and help your child. Apart from confidential rules of storing and managing claimed in research information leaflet, two issues should be highlighted here. Firstly, even this is a governmental funded project, the funder has no right to access original data. Secondly, after I finish my PhD programme (got my grade back), I will only retain anonymised materials. However, I will confidentially dispose of materials, which including participants' confident information, such as consent form with their names and signatures.

#### 4. Participation

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Thus, there will be no financial reward for your child's participation. As highlighted in research information leaflet, in whole research process, your child can freely choose to leave or return to the research throughout my fieldwork.

If you have questions or concerns about child's participation in this project, please contact me:

Email Address: [REDACTED]@qq.com    Mobile Phone: [REDACTED]    QQ: [REDACTED]

If all research-related information has been provided to your satisfaction and you agree your child to participate in this project, please tick the following statement and sign your name below.

I have read and understand this consent form and freely consent for your child's participation in this study.

I have informed this research's information and researcher's contact details to children's parents. (For children of migrant parents' local guardians only)

Signature of Parent/Guardian      Child's name      Date

Thank you very much for your support!

## 儿童参与研究同意书

尊敬的父母/监护人人们，

非常感谢您抽时间阅读这一份儿童参与研究同意书！

根据儿童研究伦理要求，在正式将儿童纳入到研究过程之前，研究员必须确认该儿童的参与获得了其父母或者其他监护人的许可。在您阅读接下来内容之前，请您先仔细阅读随文奉上的《研究介绍书》，以了解本研究的基本信息。

### 1. 研究方法

本次研究为一次为时 5 个月的田野调查，包括了参与观察，日常闲谈，小组访谈，个人访谈和研究趣味活动。

**参与观察与日常闲谈：**在工作日时，我将会对儿童的校园生活进行观察，重点记录儿童在不同的环境下与朋辈群体的互动。例如，儿童们在教室，走廊，操场，食堂等不同环境中的互动。在观察的过程中，我也会加入到孩子们的互动中去，和孩子们聊天，做游戏等等，以增进我与孩子们之间的友谊。在参与观察和日常闲谈中获得的信息，会以手写笔记，录音，视频，照片等形式进行记录。

**小组访谈和个人访谈：**小组和个人访谈将在田野调查的后期开展（大概从五月份开始）。所有的小组访谈将在学校进行。个人访谈视个人的情况，在学校或者孩子家里开展。所有的访谈内容都会被录音用作后续数据分析，如果孩子或者孩子的父母及监护人反对，将会取消或者停止录音。

**趣味研究活动：**在整个田野调查过程中，我会组织一系列的趣味研究活动。例如，孩子们会被组织起来，以“我和我的朋友”为主题进行画画和小短文的写作活动。在这一类的趣味研究活动中，孩子们可能会有一个作品产生，例如画作，文章和手工。因为研究的需要，我会很乐意保管孩子们的作品。但是，如果孩子们也可以自由地将自己的作品带回家收藏。如果孩子们希望带走作品自己保管，在获得孩子的允许之后，我会对孩子们的作品进行拍照保存。

### 2. 参与研究的益处

作为研究的参与者，您的孩子会在研究中收获如下益处。第一，研究结束之后，我会给每位参与研究的小朋友一份答谢礼，包括笔记本等其他精美文具。第二，我会在我最后的博士论文的答谢致辞中对孩子的参与进行专门的答谢，所有答谢内容将会记录在博士论文的文本和演讲中。第三，作为一个采用儿童为中心的新型儿童研究方法的研究，整个研究过程强调孩子们的参与和尊重孩子们的自由意志。所以，在整个研究过程中，孩子们会被充分赋权，让他们自己的想法和感受被聆听，被重视和被采用。相信这一次积极的研究参与体验，会让孩子们在日后的生活中更加的自信。

### 3. 匿名与保密

研究中获取的所有包含孩子和其家庭的私人信息的材料都会被进行匿名处理。但是如果我担心您的孩子在日常生活中受到了不公正对待，我会将该情况与儿童保护人员进行共享，以求为您的孩子提供帮助。所有的音影资料中都不会包含孩子们的个人信息。所有的音影资料都不会从研究数据库中流出。除了《研究介绍书》中提到的各项匿名与保密措施，还有两点是需要进一步解释说明的。第一，虽然这是一个政府资助的研究课题，但是资助方没有权限查阅原始文献。资助方只能获取最终的，经过匿名化与保密化处理的研究成果报告。第二，在我完成我的博士课程，取得博士学位之后，我只会保留经过匿名化与保密化处理之后的研究数据。所有包含研究对象及其家庭私人信息的材料，包括带有签名的《研究同意书》等，都会被彻底销毁和从电脑中删除。

### 4. 自愿参与和自由退出

是否参与研究，需要孩子和自己的父母或其他监护人商量之后共同决定。所有孩子们的研究参与需要绝对服从自愿原则。因为是自愿参与，所有的研究参与者不会获得金钱报酬。在整个研究过程中，正如《研究介绍书》中声明的，所有的孩子能够在研究的任何阶段，自由地选择退出研究或者返回研究。

对于本《儿童研究同意书》和《研究介绍书》中的内容，如果您有任何的疑问请随时联系我：

邮箱地址为：[\[redacted\]@qq.com](mailto: [redacted]@qq.com)

QQ 号：

电话号码：

如果您所有的疑问和顾虑都获得了满意的解释，并且您在深思熟虑之后同意您的孩子参与这次研究，就请您在下方的陈述后面的方框中“打勾”，并且在陈述后面的位置签上您的名字，您孩子的名字和今天的日期。

我，已经认真阅读，理解并接受了本《儿童研究同意书》中阐释的内容，并且同意我的孩子参与此项研究。

我，已经将《研究介绍书》的内容，以及研究人员的联系方式告知孩子的父母。（仅用于父母均外出打工情况）

家长签名

孩子姓名

日期

非常感谢您对本次研究的支持！祝您工作顺利！身体安康！



## Appendix VI: Children Informed Consent Form

Hey, do you agree?

Hi, dear little friends, thank you for being interested in this research project!  
Before start our **children's friendship exploring journey**, please read the below points carefully!

If you agree the point, please mark ✓; if you disagree the point, please mark ✗.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Yan 📞

Mobile Phone [REDACTED]

QQ: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]@qq.com



1 I have read and understand the content of research information leaflet.

✓ ✗

2 I have taken one copy of research information leaflet and parental informed consent to my parent (s)/guardian(s); my participation has received their permission.

✓ ✗

3 I understand that I can withdraw my participation anytime during fieldwork.

✓ ✗

4 I understand Yan will keep all my information confidentially, but if Yan is worried about I am at significant harm, Yan cannot keep my information confidentially because she needs to involve qualified people to protect and help me.

✓ ✗

5 I agree that I sometimes (which times will be announced in advanced) will be audio/video-recorded in research-related activities unless I reject.

✓ ✗

6 I agree that Yan has explained me all my concerns in an understandable way.

✓ ✗

If you understand, agree and accept above six points, and finally decide to join this research, please write down your name and date in below space.




\_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Month \_\_\_\_\_ Year

THANKYOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

## 你，同意吗？

嗨，亲爱的小朋友们！非常谢谢你们愿意加入我的研究！

在我们正式开始我们**儿童友谊探索之旅**之前，请认真阅读下面的内容！如果你同意，就请用笔圈出**✓**，如果你不同意，就请用笔圈出**✗**。

如果你有任何疑问请联系**朱颜** 



电话：[redacted]  
QQ：[redacted]  
邮箱：[redacted]@qq.com

- 1 我，已经认真阅读并理解了《研究小简介》中的内容。 ✓ ✗
- 2 我，已经将《研究简介》和《研究许可书》转交给了我的监护人；我的参与获得我的监护人的许可。 ✓ ✗
- 3 我，明白我在研究的任何阶段都可以自由地退出研究，我所需要做的就是把我的决定告诉朱颜。 ✓ ✗
- 4 我，明白朱颜的研究将遵守保密原则，我的个人信息会被匿名处理和安全存放。但是，在特殊情况下（例如，我遭受了校园欺凌，需要朱颜的帮助），我同意朱颜在与我商量之后，适当将我的个人信息与专业人员（例如，老师和社会工作者）共享，来帮助我处理问题。 ✓ ✗
- 5 我，同意朱颜在与我商量之后，在基于保密原则的前提下，对我们的谈话进行录音或者录像。 ✓ ✗
- 6 我，同意朱颜已经对我所有关于研究的疑问给出了令我满意的解释。 ✓ ✗

如果你对上面六个事项都理解、认同和接受，并最终决定参加研究，请在这里写下你的名字和今天的日期：



2016 年 \_\_\_\_ 月 \_\_\_\_ 日

谢谢你的支持！

## Appendix VII: Informed Consent Form for teachers

### Informed Consent Form (for teachers)

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for being interested in my research - How do Chinese rural children of migrant parent(s) experience and understand peer friendships? Before you decide your participation, please read and complete this form carefully. If you have any questions about this form and this project, please feel free to ask me or contact me:

Email Address: [REDACTED]@qq.com

Mobile Phone: [REDACTED]

QQ: [REDACTED]

Please read six below statements and tick the following box if you agree with the statement.

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understood the 'Research Information Leaflet', and have been given a chance to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I confirm that I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am not being rewarded financially for my participation in this research.                                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I confirm that I agree that Yan will take field notes during her everyday observation unless I reject.                                                                                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I confirm that data recorded in Yan's field notes can be used in future reports or publications after anonymization, unless I reject.                                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I confirm that I understand that my personal information will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.                                                                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I confirm that I understand that I can withdraw my participation anytime during fieldwork.                                                                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I confirm that I agree to take part in this study.                                                                                                                                                | <input type="checkbox"/> |

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Thank you very much for your participation!

研究参与同意书  
(用于老师)

尊敬的研究参与者，  
十分感谢您在百忙之中对《中国农村留守儿童对于朋辈友谊的理解和体验研究》的支持！在您决定是否参与研究之前，请您认真阅读下面的内容。对于下面陈述的内容，如果您有任何意义问和顾虑，请联系我：

邮箱地址：[redacted]@qq.com

手机号码：[redacted]

QQ号：[redacted]

请您阅读下面六个陈述，如果您同意陈述中的内容，请在每个陈述后对应的方框中打勾。

1. 我，已经认真阅读，并理解朱颜提供的《研究介绍书》；我，已经就我疑惑和顾虑的部分与朱颜进行探讨，并得到了满意的答复。

☐

2. 我，同意我本次参与是自愿的，并且不会因为参与访谈而获得金钱酬劳。

☐

3. 我，同意朱颜在日常观察中进行田野笔记的记录，除非我提出反对。

☐

4. 我，同意朱颜将日常观察所取得的内容，在匿名处理之后应用到她的博士毕业论文和学术作品中（包括会议，期刊论文等），除非我提出反对。

☐

5. 我，同意朱颜在学术论文和演讲中将我的名字和个人信息进行匿名处理。

☐

6. 我，明白我在研究的任何阶段都可以自由地退出研究。

☐

7. 我，同意参加本次研究。

☐

\_\_\_\_\_  
参与者姓名

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

**非常感谢您的参与！祝您工作顺利！身体安泰！**

## Appendix VIII: Informed Consent Form (for adults' formal interview)

### Informed Consent Form (for adults' formal interview)

Dear Participant,

Thank you very much for being interested in my research - How do Chinese rural children of migrant parent(s) experience and understand peer friendships? Before we start interview, please read and complete this form carefully. If you have any questions about this form and this project, please feel free to ask me or contact me:

Email Address: [REDACTED] qq.com

Mobile Phone: [REDACTED]

QQ: [REDACTED]

Please read six below statements and tick the following box if you agree with the statement.

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                          |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understood the 'Research Information Leaflet', and have been given a chance to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.                                                           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I confirm that I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am not being rewarded financially for my participation in this research.                                                                                                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I confirm that I understand that if I agree to participate in interviews, the interview will be audio-recorded unless I reject.                                                                                                                             | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I confirm that I agree that direct quotes from informal interviews in this research might be used in future reports or publications unless I reject.                                                                                                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I confirm that I understand that my personal information will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.                                                                                                                                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I confirm that I understand there is an exception to confidentiality of the content of this interview because if Yan is worried about any child I mentioned is at significant harm, she will involve qualified people to protect and help the harmed child. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I confirm that I agree to take part in this study.                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Interviewer

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Thank you very much for your participation!

**研究参与同意书**  
(用于成人正式访谈)

尊敬的研究参与者，

十分感谢您在百忙之中对《中国农村留守儿童对于朋辈友谊的理解和体验研究》的支持！在正式开始进行本次访谈之前，请您认真阅读下面的内容。对于下面陈述的内容，如果您有任何疑问和顾虑，请联系我：

邮箱地址：[ ]@qq.com

手机号码：[ ]

QQ 号：[ ]

请您阅读下面六个陈述，如果您同意陈述中的内容，请在每个陈述后对应的方框中打勾。

1. 我，已经认真阅读，并理解朱颜提供的《研究介绍书》；我，已经就我疑惑和顾虑的部分与朱颜进行探讨，并得到了满意的答复。 ☐
2. 我，同意我本次参与访谈的行为是自愿的，并且不会因为参与访谈而获得金钱酬劳。 ☐
3. 我，同意朱颜对本次访谈进行录音，除非我提出反对。 ☐
4. 我，同意朱颜将本次访谈所取得的内容，在匿名处理之后应用到她的博士毕业论文和学术作品中（包括会议，期刊论文等）。 ☐
5. 我，同意朱颜在学术论文和演讲中将我的名字和个人信息进行匿名处理。 ☐
6. 我，同意如果我朱颜担心任何我在访谈中提到的儿童，在日常生活中受到了严重的心理或者生理伤害，她会将访谈信息与专业儿童保护人员进行共享，以求给受伤害儿童提供及时和专业的帮助。 ☐
7. 我，同意参加本次研究。 ☐

\_\_\_\_\_  
被访者姓名

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

\_\_\_\_\_  
访谈者姓名

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
签名

**非常感谢您的参与！祝您工作顺利！身体安泰！**



## Appendix IX: Oral Consent Script

### Oral Consent Script

This is a summary of oral consent script, including general consent questions for all participants, and consent questions for children, parents/guardians, and other adults.

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Before we continue, can I ask you to confirm each of the following things?

**[I will use recorder to audio-record the whole process of doing oral consent to check agreement to each of the statements below. Then, the whole process will be to be transcribed.]**

1. That you have read research information leaflet and understood the background information for the project. (For all)
2. That you have had the opportunity to ask any questions and concerns you have about the project/interview/focus group, and all answers has been provided to your satisfaction (For all)
3. That you agree to voluntarily participate in this project/interview/focus group/activity. (For all except parental consent)
4. That you agree for your child's voluntary participation in this project. (For parental consent)
5. That you understand you're free to withdraw/return your participation at any stage of this project/interview/focus group/activity and to decide not to answer any particular questions. (For all)
6. That you understand that this interview/focus group/activity will be audio-recorded/video-recorded unless you reject. (For all)
7. That you understand that what you tell me in this study/interview/focus group/activity will be used in my PhD thesis and probably other academic reports and publications but not in a form that will allow you or your family/friends to be identified. (For all)
8. That you understand all your personal information will be anonymized and kept confidentially. However, if I am worried about you/your child/ child you mentioned are at significant harm, I cannot completely keep your information confidentially because I need to involve qualified people to protect and help you/ your child/ harmed child. (For all)

**Thank you very much for your support!**

### 研究同意书（口头同意）

这一份《研究同意书（口头同意）》是一份与本次研究对象关于研究参与和各种伦理问题达成共识的条例总结。其内容包括了与所有研究参与者，与儿童研究参与者，与儿童的父母或其他监护人，与其他成人研究参与者应达成的共识。

研究参与者的姓名: \_\_\_\_\_

在我们继续下一步之前，我能否就一些问题与你达成共识？

（整个寻求研究对象口头同意的过程会用音频进行完整记录。音频记录旨在反映出所有在口头同意协商中达成的共识。整个音频内容会在后续阶段被原样抄录下来以作备案。）

1. 你/您已经认真阅读了《研究介绍书》，并且明白了本次研究的基本信息。（对全体参与者有效）
2. 你/您已经被给予了充分的机会和我探讨你对于本次研究所有的问题和疑虑，并且您所有的问题和疑虑都已经被满意地解答。（对全体参与者有效）
3. 你/您同意自愿参加本次研究/访谈/小组讨论/研究趣味活动。（对全体参与者有效，除了在征求儿童父母或其他监护人对儿童在本次研究中的参与许可）
4. 您同意你的孩子自愿参加这次研究。（用于征求儿童父母或其他监护人对儿童在本次研究中的参与许可）
5. 你/您明白在研究/访谈/小组访谈/研究趣味活动的任何阶段你都可以自由地退出或者重返研究，并且你明白你有权拒绝回答任何问题。（对全体参与者有效）
6. 我明白这次的访谈/小组访谈/研究趣味活动会被以音频或者视频的形式记录下来，除非我提出反对。（对全体参与者有效）
7. 你明白你在研究/访谈/小组访谈/趣味活动中向我提供的所有信息都会被运用到我的博士毕业论文中，并且有可能运用到我后续的学术报告和出版物中。但是，所有的信息都会经过匿名和保密处理，你的个人信息和家人及朋友的信息都不会被泄露。（对全体参与者有效）
8. 我明白我的个人信息会被匿名和保密处理。但是如果我怀疑你/您的孩子/您提到的儿童，在日常生活中受到了严重的心理或者生理伤害，我会将你/您的孩子/您提到的儿童的部分信息与专业儿童保护人员进行共享，以求给你/您的孩子/受伤害儿童提供及时和专业的帮助。

**非常感谢你/您对本次研究的支持！**